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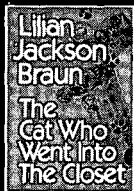
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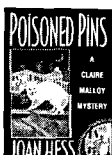
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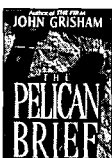
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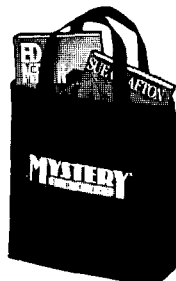
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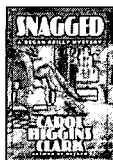
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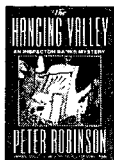
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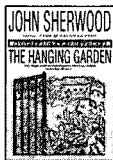
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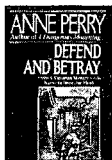
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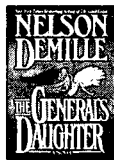
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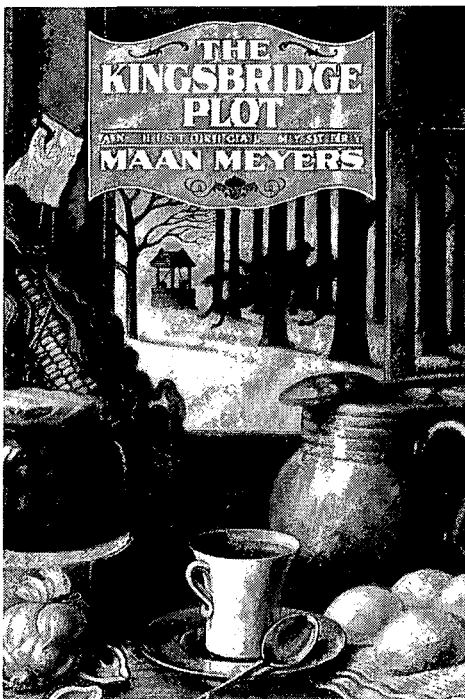
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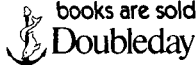
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

We would first like to draw your attention to the questionnaire on the facing page. As you can see, it's a brief and straightforward affair, written in hopes of finding out more about our readers. We would just like to know you, for one thing—and the more we know, the more AHMM can flourish.

Needless to say, all the questionnaires are confidential.

So, pencils out, everyone. And thank you. And thank you also for your envelope and stamp—we know we're asking a bit extra in that regard, and we do appreciate it.

In the meantime, in this issue . . . We are pleased to introduce Diane McGuire to you, author of our cover story "Wicked

Twist." As the story (her first) reveals, Ms. McGuire knows a great deal about Cape Cod, having spent summers there since early childhood. In addition, her degree was in biology, and she is a seventh and ninth grade science teacher.

For the rest, we have a new Polijn story (and another sea story) from Dan Crawford; Polijn is in trouble again. George C. Chesbro, executive vice-president of the Mystery Writers of America, by the way, and author of many novels and short stories, takes us across the continent to Alaska, to a hair-raising ice cave in "Tomb." Jackie Walsh, author of "Early to Rise," is back, with another of her twisty tales (also hair-raising). And more!

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Aunt Sara's Favors

by Judith L. Post



Carly turned into the long, winding drive that led to Aunt Sara's house. Sara was really her great-aunt, but Carly never thought of her that way. When Carly's parents had died in a

car crash six years ago, Sara was the relative who'd stepped in to help fill the void. Carly had spent college breaks on Aunt Sara's sprawling estate. She'd grown fond of the grumbling old curmudgeon and had

seen the integrity masked by the prickly facade.

Aunt Sara's huge, ornate Victorian sat back from the road, surrounded by herbageous borders of daisies, daylilies, and campanula. A formal rose garden spilled crimson blooms from thorny stems. As Carly swung her Jeep into the turnoff and cut the engine, she stopped to admire the old mansion with its mansard roof, deep verandahs, and fancy gingerbread trim. With its buff clapboards and sage accents, it was a real beauty, but only someone as wealthy as Aunt Sara could afford to keep it up.

Carly had been summoned to her aunt's birthday supper by a peremptory call.

"I'm expecting you, dear, and I won't take no for an answer." Aunt Sara never took no for an answer, as far as Carly was concerned. Once Sara's favorite niece, she was now in disfavor. "You must understand, dear, I admire your chutzpah in getting a career. I read all the articles you submit to the paper. But to advocate voting for a Democrat? That's going too far, I'm afraid. I had to cut you from my will."

Aunt Sara was forever cutting one or another of them from her will. Carly had survived the longest, but the slightest show of independence

courted trouble. When Carly had written an article bashing Republicans, she'd fully expected her aunt's wrath to rain upon her head, but she really didn't care. She had no intentions of fawning and simpering for Aunt Sara's money. She'd rather be poor.

Carly was crossing the manicured lawn toward the brick steps leading to the house when Uncle Dooley's Seville pulled in. A window slid down silently, and Uncle Dooley's shaggy gray head popped out.

"Heard you pissed the old broad off," Uncle Dooley barked. "Turned into a bleeding-heart liberal and got cut from the will."

Carly smiled. Uncle Dooley was a wheeler-dealer whose character was as colorful as his language. He'd been cut from Sara's will when he'd married an exotic dancer he'd met at a friend's bachelor party. Aunt Sara had given the marriage two months. Dooley and Cleo had been together thirty-two years.

"I'm a fallen woman," Carly admitted. "Any words of sympathy?"

"Hell, you're better off without the old bat. You're doing great on your own." With a wave of his hand, Dooley went to park in the turnoff, sliding

his Caddy between Carly's Jeep and Aunt Crystal's BMW.

Carly straightened her shoulders and marched up the steps. If Crystal had flown in from California, Aunt Sara must have ordered every family member to attend. That would mean a stiff, no-expenses spared, five-course meal with sniper fire conversation, while Uncle Leroy took potshots at Aunt Eunice, Cousin Avery made sarcastic innuendoes concerning Dooley's daughter Rose, and everyone tried to curry favor with their rich elderly relative.

Bon appetit! Carly told herself. She'd try to survive another family celebration.

They were seated at the massive, mahogany table in the formal dining room. A cut-glass chandelier twinkled above them. Flames flickered from candelabra at each end of the table. Burgundy wallpaper was echoed by matching napkins and seat cushions. China sparkled; silverware glittered, but the atmosphere remained cold and strained.

Aunt Sara believed in old fashioned quality, everything meticulously prepared but nothing flamboyant or frivolous. Carly was glad that she'd chosen her velvet dress for the occasion. Aunt Sara herself had

gone to some bother this time. Her iron-gray hair was coiffed in a tight cap, close to the head, her face was powdered, and a slight tinge of rouge pinkened her cheeks. She wore a floor length silver sheath that made her matronly figure appear regal.

"You'll sit next to me, dear," she informed Carly. "I can't bear to listen to that fool Leroy, with his fake flattery and transparent greed."

Carly glanced at the place-card on the dinner plate across from her. "Have you invited another guest?"

"Yes, a surprise for the rest of you. He'll be here any moment now. I've arranged for him to come after the appetizers so we can have a short, family time in private before we proceed to the festivities."

Carly frowned. Aunt Sara's spirits were too high. There was an energy suppressed beneath her cool formality.

"You're up to something," Carly challenged.

Aunt Sara smiled. "You know me too well. Such a precocious young upstart, but my lips are sealed. You'll have to wait with the rest of the lemmings."

Sara's contempt for her heirs used to bother Carly, but she'd begun to understand it after a while.

"It doesn't especially instill fondness when you realize that your relatives can hardly wait to see you dead," Sara had told her once. "You imagine when they look at you they don't see a person at all, only dollar signs."

"Is that why you're so cruel to them?" Carly had asked.

"If they see me as future condos and fat bank accounts, I see them as spineless leeches," Sara had explained. "I can't respect them, so I play with them, I suppose."

It wasn't that Carly agreed with her aunt, but she could empathize. Sara had never been stingy with her fortune. She'd sent money for Carly's birthday every year, she'd bought her a car for her sixteenth birthday, paid her way through college. And she'd done the same for every person sitting at this table. But they all knew that Sara had lots more, and most of them wanted a piece of it.

Caterers brought out chilled silver dishes of cold shrimp nestled on beds of romaine with cocktail sauce pooled in the center. Corks were popped, and champagne was poured.

When the servers left the room, Aunt Sara stood and raised her glass in a toast. "To my family on my eightieth birthday. You've waited with bated breath for my demise. To-

night I am happy to inform you that you shall soon have your wish."

Carly's hand shook as she held her glass in a salute to Sara.

"What are you babbling about?" Dooley demanded. "You look healthy as a horse." Her announcement had clearly upset him. Like Carly, he might openly flaunt Aunt Sara's dictums, but he admired her nonetheless.

"My doctor visited me recently. He informed me that I have a cancer that spread quickly and irreversibly. He gave me two months to live, tops. If I'm thoughtful, I'll try to die faster."

Carly's hand sank, and she blinked back tears.

White-knuckled, Dooley gripped the edge of the table. "There's chemotherapy. There's bone marrow treatments. Hell, you have enough money to try some of those new miracle drugs."

"I appreciate your concern," Sara told him, "but let me assure you that, for me, two months is an ultimatum."

Carly scanned the table. The rest of the family was taking the news with open delight. Their shining eyes and feverish expressions made her turn away in disgust.

"And why are you telling us?" Avery inquired. His voice had a snide, nasal quality. Carly thought it came from years of whining.

Aunt Crystal raised an eyebrow at her son in warning. The message was clear. "Don't blow it now."

As usual, Avery ignored her. Crystal had spoiled him his entire life. He expected her to dote on him forever. "You've cut every single one of us from your will, haven't you?" he persisted. "Even little goody-two-shoes finally got the axe. So what's it to us? You've probably left your entire fortune to some cat cemetery or something, to rub it in."

"On the contrary." Aunt Sara smiled. "Faced with my own mortality, it occurred to me that I was luckier than most. My Maker gave me a warning. I have time to put things in order before I leave this place."

Carly twisted in her chair to see Aunt Sara better. Had the cancer affected her mind? Or was Death scary enough to nudge her to balance the scales before she departed?

"Just exactly what are you telling us?" Uncle Leroy asked. For once, his usual religious rhetoric failed him. He usually wrapped every pronouncement in moral invective, ranting against the sins of the wealthy

endlessly, but he never turned down any money that Aunt Sara offered. His wife, holier-than-thou Gladys, almost embraced their poverty, shrouding herself in false humility. For once, Carly was glad to see Gladys's usual saying, the one about the eye of a needle, shrivel on her lips when money was dangled before her.

"Poor relations," Avery called them. And the two daughters, Angel and Chastity, deeply resented it. Now they sat, like vultures, their long fingernails hooked like talons in a spasm of greed.

Aunt Sara sighed. "Though I can't pretend that most of you haven't disappointed me, you're still my flesh and blood. I'd like to die at peace with the world. That includes you."

"Can you be more specific?" Aunt Eunice asked.

Everyone stared. Aunt Eunice lived on a mountainside in Aspen. Her house faced the east so she could commune with the Oneness every morning. Once a month she fasted until she hallucinated. She wore long, flowing caftans and heavy sandals. Everyone thought of her as a spiritual flake, but Carly knew that Eunice was very capable of harboring long, festering grudges. Her eccentricities hid her proclivity to blame everyone else,

including the Universe, for any personal discomfort.

"You want the specifics?" Aunt Sara asked. She pointed to the empty chair. "I've invited my lawyer, Ian Farrell, to join us for dinner. He'll bring my latest will. If you'd prefer, he can read it before the main course. Then, perhaps, you can enjoy your meal."

Carly's lips trembled. She wasn't sure she'd be able to eat. Her stomach felt queasy. She couldn't swallow the lump in her throat.

"For the present," Aunt Sara concluded, "let's drink to my health and get on with my birthday celebration." As she tipped her glass, the others followed. It was only when she'd sunk back into her seat that she reached for Carly's hand, giving it a firm squeeze. "Don't you worry, my dear. Life has never gotten the better of me, and neither will Death. Remember that you have a lot of my traits, whether you want them or not. And also remember that my lawyer is a fine young man with a brilliant career ahead of him, and he's a Republican."

Ian Farrell appeared promptly at seven, just in time for the second course. As servants laddled chilled watercress soup into shallow china bowls, Carly

studied the man seated across from her. He was tall, probably six two, with dark hair that was a little too long and gray eyes that were a little too close.

"What do you think of him?" Aunt Sara asked candidly. "I told him you were a choosy customer. I didn't think you'd go for anything too pretty. Did you notice his crooked nose?"

Carly could feel a blush creep up her cheeks.

Ian laughed. "I don't know if Sara picked me for my legal expertise or my broken nose. My brother bashed me when I was a little too full of myself. It taught me humility in record time."

"He has a scar by the side of his mouth, too," Sara pointed out.

"A hockey puck," he informed me, "but the teeth are all mine."

"Aunt Sara, will you quit?"

"If you insist, dear." But Sara looked much too smug. "Why don't you tell her something about your family, Ian? She won't be impressed with your credentials. She's a reporter. She thinks all lawyers are crooks."

A raised eyebrow. "Well, unfortunately, I come from a long line of lawyers. My father taught me that it was an honorable profession. Maybe my

mother will redeem me. She's a sculptress."

Carly sighed. "Aunt Sara's had enough fun with us. I refuse to encourage her. I'm sure you're a perfectly fine lawyer, and it's a pleasure meeting you."

Ian tipped his head toward Sara, his eyes gleaming. "Tou-ché, old girl. You gave it your best shot, but I'd say she's put you in your place."

Old girl? Carly waited for her aunt to wither him with a few choice words. Instead, Sara chuckled softly. "She's a chip off the old block." She glanced down the table. "But my loved ones can hardly swallow, they're so filled with anticipation. Shall we finish our soup and put them out of their misery? You brought the new will?"

Nodding, Ian patted his inside jacket pocket.

The dishes had been cleared away. Before the main course, Ian Farrell stood and unfolded the legal document tucked in his pocket. He read aloud:

"I, Sara Marshall, being of sound mind and body . . ."

The people lining the long mahogany table leaned forward. Carly watched each of their faces as Ian read the particular bequest that pertained to them.

"To Crystal, who's as brilliant and transparent as her name, who married money and felt she'd earned it, I leave two hundred thousand dollars. That should keep her in face-lifts and tummy-tucks for the rest of her forced youth."

Crystal's mouth dropped open in pleased surprise.

"To her petulant son Avery, I leave another two hundred thousand so that he can fob his way to elegance as a male secretary to whatever narcissist he's attached himself to at the moment."

Avery bowed his head in ironic salute to his aunt's largesse.

"To Leroy, Gladys, and their daughters . . ."

Angel and Chastity gripped hands and held their breaths. Carly couldn't blame them. Their parents had glamorized the Spartan life long enough. Teenagers were interested in more than just their souls.

" . . . the most self-righteous hypocrites I've ever met, I leave five hundred thousand, and may they learn to enjoy God's blessings half as much as they have His tests and tribulations."

Gladys's mouth set in a prim line, but Leroy's face glowed as if he'd seen the Second Coming. Carly had no doubt that Leroy's family would soon learn to

praise the Lord for the very thing they'd spent most of their lives condemning as the Devil's lure.

"To Eunice, I leave two hundred thousand so that she may converse with the spirit world and channel their messages to the rest of us. May they be more forgiving than she is."

Eunice fingered the magic stones that circled her neck on a thin silver chain. Each stone supposedly enhanced a special quality and helped to balance her many needs.

"To Dooley and Cleo and their daughter Rose, I leave a million dollars because they've never asked or expected a penny from me."

Dooley looked surprised, pleased, and pained all at the same time. As far as Carly could tell, he was the only relative who took his blessing as bittersweet. She honestly believed that he'd rather see Sara live a few years longer.

"And last," Ian read, "I come to Carly. To her, I leave my house and the bulk of my estate, on the condition that, within one year, she marry my lawyer, Ian Farrell." He paused here, frowning. "I admire her courage and obstinance, but realize it needs tempering by a firm Republican hand. May she and Ian love this old place as much as I have."

He finished, his voice definitely revealing that the last had come as a surprise to him. When he refolded the will and placed it in his shirt pocket, Aunt Sara rose.

"There. We've followed my maxim of placing business before pleasure. Now let's proceed with our meal. And let's hope that I die before my sensibilities revolt at this outrageous extravagance. I shall do my best to think positively until my last breath."

With that, she rang a bell, and the servants returned.

Spinach salad was followed by thick slices of beef tenderloin, succulently pink and tender, nestled between buttered noodles and a tomato and artichoke side dish. As Carly tasted her first mouth-watering sliver of beef, a server poured a tall glass of red wine.

"Do we have cake and ice cream for dessert?" she asked Aunt Sara.

Sara wrinkled her nose as Carly knew she would. "Good heavens, no. Italian cheesecake and espresso will be served in the salon. A small ensemble will play music for us, too."

Carly's eyes widened. "You've gone all out."

Smiling, Sara said, "Why not? This is my last birthday. I intend to enjoy it."

"To you, then!" Carly raised her wineglass in a toast.

They'd retired to the salon and the band was playing when the servers brought out the dessert. People came to give small, token gifts to Aunt Sara, then hurried away before they could anger her. Sara had finished her espresso when she stood abruptly, her face frozen in shock, her hand grasping her throat. She swayed slightly, stumbled, then crashed forward. Carly tried to block her fall but couldn't.

"Aunt Sara?" Fighting back panic, she knelt beside her. There was no movement at all. Her chest didn't rise and fall. She lay perfectly still. Feeling for a pulse, Carly cried, "Call 911. Call her doctor. Get help!"

Ian Farrell hurried to a phone. Everyone else stood in shocked silence.

"Cyanide," Ian told the sober group of people gathered in the living room.

Aunt Eunice was perched on the edge of a rococo-style chair with carved cabriole legs and an oval back. She placed her fingers on her temples and intoned, "Someone didn't want Sara to change her will before she died."

"We don't need a damned channeler to figure that out,"

Dooley snapped. He heaved himself away from the marble fireplace he'd been leaning against and turned to face the others. "The question is: who?"

Angel and Chastity squirmed on the velvet sofa, avoiding his eyes. Leroy leapt to his feet from the low ottoman. "Don't even look at my family. The Lord's commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill,' is enough to deter us."

"Really?" Avery shrugged his thin shoulders. "Isn't there one that says 'Thou shalt not covet,' but that never stopped you, did it?"

Gladys shot back, "It must take a lot of money to buy the silk shirts and cravats you always wear. You can't make enough as a male . . ." she said it like a question ". . . secretary to afford all the fancy conceits you like."

Crystal strode toward the center of the room. Her white hair, pulled back into a tight chignon, accented her perfect profile. Her simple red wool shirtdress was flawlessly tailored, her makeup expertly applied. Everything about her attested to understated elegance. Everything except her raging temper. "You, of all people, have no right to talk to my son that way. You call yourself a Christian, but you don't have an ounce of human charity. You're

the most repressed, frigid, emotional skinflint I've ever met."

Dooley's daughter Rose giggled.

Crystal swung to glare at her. "What's so funny?"

Rose pressed a hand over her mouth and stammered, "I was just thinking that you're all acting exactly the way Dad described you."

Crystal raised blazing blue eyes to Dooley.

"I only tell it the way I see it," Dooley said. "Good God, Sara would have loved to have watched this. It's better than a soap opera. She would have died laughing."

"What did you say?" For the first time, Carly forced herself to concentrate. Usually, she blocked out all of their bickering and back stabbing. Tonight, it nauseated her more than usual.

"Carly, girl, think about it. Sara'd be laughing her ass off." Dooley's words died away as he looked at Carly's face. "What is it? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Did any of you have any inkling what Sara had in mind when she invited us here tonight?"

"How could we?" Dooley said. "None of us knew she was going to kick the bucket."

"Except maybe Eunice," Avery jibed. "Maybe her rarefied psyche picked up on it."

"Will you just shut up!" Crystal snapped.

Avery opened his mouth, then thought better of it. He sulked into silence.

"What are you getting at?" Crystal prodded.

"None of us could have possibly known that Aunt Sara rewrote her will and *added* people for a change," Carly told them.

"So?" Leroy asked.

"How many people carry cyanide with them just in case it might come in handy?"

"What . . . ?" Crystal paused. "Yes, I see."

"Well, I don't. What are you talking about?" Eunice demanded.

Crystal's eyes narrowed as she turned to study Ian. "Only someone who knew about the will ahead of time could have come prepared to ensure that Sara didn't change it."

Ian flinched as the accusation hit home. "I didn't know about the last clause. One of my partners must have helped Sara draft it."

"Or that's what you'd like us to believe," Avery said.

Carly shook her head. "No, it wouldn't make sense for Ian to have killed her, either. If I understand wills, no one can collect on the estate until the murder is solved, so the murderer couldn't benefit from Sara's death."

"So if he bumped her off," Dooley said, "and couldn't stick it on one of us, he'd be left empty-handed. Right?"

"What did Aunt Sara love more than anything else?" Carly asked.

"To make us squirm," Leroy answered quickly.

"Watching us grovel," Avery added.

"And she's gotten her dying wish," Carly said. "She knew we'd be arguing and pointing our fingers at each other."

"Would you get to the point?" Crystal commanded.

Carly took a deep breath. "Did Aunt Sara have you bring any other documents besides the will?" she asked Ian.

"Only an envelope for the caterers. I was to give it to them at the end of the evening."

"Would you mind opening it now?"

He looked quizzical but pulled it from his pocket. A check was inside, and a handwritten note. He scanned it quickly, then said, "I don't believe it."

"What does it say, for God's sake?" Dooley demanded.

"I, Sara Marshall, knowing the ridiculous, frivolous natures of my near and dear, can-

not abide the thought of their fawning over me in my last days, hoping to assure themselves of my favors and even possibly wresting someone else's inheritance for themselves. Therefore I've decided to spare myself the mental anguish and enjoy my death as much as possible. I'm sure you've lived up to my low expectations. Please try to conduct yourselves more civilly at my funeral. P.S. If anyone found me out, I'm sure it was Carly, unless she's grieving too much to have her wits about her. Hang onto her, Ian. With relief that I'm gone—Sara."

Carly shook her head, smiling. "Aunt Sara told me that Life had never gotten the better of her and neither would Death. She liked to control her own destiny."

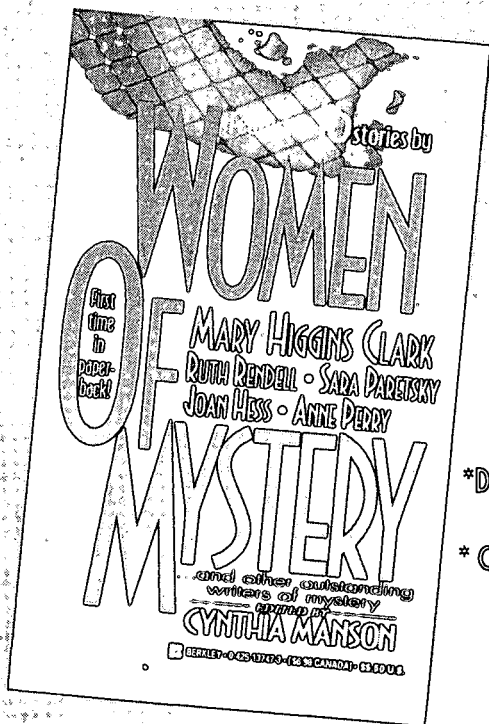
"I'll be damned!" Dooley gave a low whistle.

"She was toying with us, as usual," Avery complained.

"And you fell right into her trap," Dooley told him. "All of us did but Carly." He winked. "Now, if only she can learn to love a Republican . . ."

Carly sighed. She was right back where she'd started.

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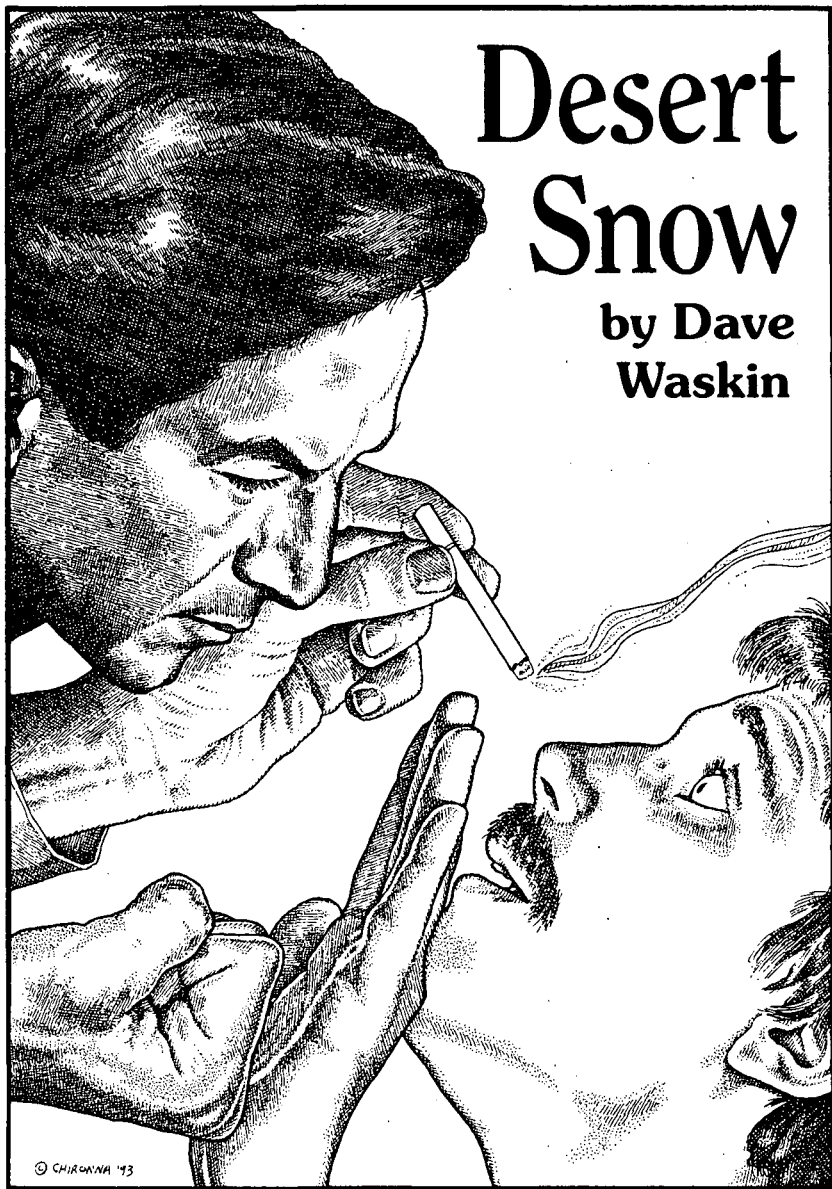


Illustration by Ron Chironna

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In Arizona, morning is sharp and clean after a night in a bar. The sun washes over you, the sky domes the earth with a good color, and the world looks like a nice place to live. It can even make you want to smile. If you don't have a hangover.

"You don't look so good," Harper told me. He was reclining in a chair, morning paper in hand. I had just struggled through the door with my duffel bag and saxophone case. The flight home to Phoenix from L.A. had been short and choppy, not helpful to my condition. I trudged back to the bedroom. After unpacking, I changed to shorts and an old T-shirt, went back out to the living room. Harper had not moved.

Joe Harper often watches the house while I'm away. Our friendship has progressed to a point where we no longer bother with greetings and formalities. His own place, the result of shrewd financial investment, is two switchbacks below mine on Camelback Mountain. The crawlspace in his basement is jammed with rock climbing equipment, and he has a library equal to those of some small towns. Since his wife died six years ago, the climbing and reading have taken over most of his retire-

ment. Blocky and windburned, he looks equal to his sixty years, thirty-five spent as a cop. He wears glasses with round wire rims, and they look fragile and delicate on his chapped and unshaven face. At first glance you expect him to speak in a husky growl, but his voice almost squeaks, and he talks quickly. Like the glasses, his voice is a poor match to his face.

"You don't look so good," he said again.

"I heard you the first time, thanks. I was trying to imagine this morning minus all those Killian's I threw back last night." I sat on the couch.

He peered at me over his glasses. "What's a Killian?"

"It's a kind of beer. It used to be my favorite."

Even though I avoid drinking at home—it saves me the beer gut—I'd found myself growing sadly accustomed to hangovers. Six nights a week in a bar will do that to you, I guess, and that's what it had been for me. Six nights in four bars in two states. The Desert Sand Band had been without a sax player when I'd gotten a call two months ago. Since then it had been a full schedule, mainly around Phoenix but also a few places in L.A.

Harper shifted in his seat. "I don't recall you drinking much

when you had your . . . other job."

"Memory is the first thing that goes when you get old."

He folded the newspaper into its original shape. "No. Ambition is the first thing that goes. And contrary to your belief, mine has not gone, simply shifted to rock climbing. Yours, on the other hand . . ." he let his voice taper off.

"Mine is to be the world's greatest musician."

"Maybe. But that doesn't change what you really are."

"And really what am I?"

"A private investigator. A good one."

"I'm retired."

"At age thirty-five?"

"Thirty-six. I told you memory is the first thing that goes." I lay back on the couch, not much in the mood for banter.

"So I'm not good with numbers," Harper persisted, "but you shouldn't have quit."

I shook my head. "Too many close calls with getting hurt, and with hurting people."

"You didn't like those parts of the job?"

"Oh, come off it, Harp. What's with you this morning?"

His voice went a rare octave lower. "Sorry. Bad news in the morning makes me irritable."

He handed me the paper. At the bottom of the front page

was news of a murder in the Glendale area. The article referred to "possible sexual assault" and cited "multiple stab wounds" as the probable cause of death, according to police lieutenant Carson Valdes. The victim had been found in her own house, by her boyfriend. Police were said to have no leads.

The victim's name was Melanie Sikona. It didn't take long for me to remember her.

"Wasn't she one of your first clients?"

I nodded. I'd never made a practice of discussing names of clients with anyone, including Harper. But when I started out as a private investigator I'd often turned to him for help. I'd given him her name so he could pull information on her ex-husband from police records. It had been a relatively simple child custody case. Melanie Sikona was not a person of sinister secrets. She was kind and ambitious and alive. Not someone who gets murdered.

I tossed the newspaper on the floor and Harper and I sat in silence.

My office is forty minutes away but I usually enjoy the drive. The office is a fourth floor room with a big window facing south. On clear days I can lean back in my chair, put my feet

on my desk, and see the Salt River Mountains.

It was late afternoon, and the November sun had the temperature in the upper seventies. My old dirt-covered Camaro was running well after a recent tuneup. I'd purchased it years ago from a man who made me promise never to get it washed. He said if it were washed it would look like any other car. When I explained this to the mechanic, he'd looked at me and shrugged. "Whatever," he said.

I parked at the office building and caught sight of something in the back seat as I was about to close my door. It was a long cardboard box, and for a moment I couldn't imagine where it had come from. Then I remembered someone setting it in front of me while I was onstage at one of the bars. Inside was a bunch of roses, now probably dead. I regretted my carelessness and took the box up to the office with me.

I sighed at the nameplate on my office door. *Mitch Travers, Confidential Investigations*. For four months I'd been telling myself that I didn't want this work any more, that I didn't need its tiny thrills making me feel like a junkie, that I could get by playing sax full time and hanging around bars all night. But I hadn't gotten around to

cleaning out the office. I put the box of roses next to my wastebasket.

The file on Melanie Sikona refreshed my memory of a few specifics, but there was nothing of use to a murder investigation. I assumed the police were checking on her ex-husband, and whatever leads the press didn't know they had. I leaned back in my chair, put my feet on the desk, and thought about whether it was possible to really change yourself. The daylight disappeared and the mountains went dark. This was Wednesday night.

On Thursday, there was another murder.

Friday morning papers reported that entry into the home of a Paradise Valley man had been made by person or persons unknown sometime late Thursday night. The victim had been stabbed several times as he slept. Police lieutenant Carson Valdes said that while there were numerous similarities between this killing and that of Melanie Sikona, there was no direct evidence linking the two crimes. The victim's name was withheld, pending notification of family.

Late Friday afternoon, a third body was found. Saturday morning papers carried headlines that spoke of a serial killer. The third victim, most

likely killed early Friday morning, had been attacked in her garage and stabbed, many times. Police now assumed the killings to be the work of one person, probably a man. They also released the names of the two most recent victims. Terrence Posada and Claire Tatum. The names were familiar to me.

Both had been clients.

“It gets better,” Harper told me over the phone. It was Saturday morning. I was at the office, looking over case files, finding no link among the three victims. “You didn’t step out your front door this morning, did you?”

“I left through the garage. Why?”

“Someone left a gift on your porch. A little sandwich bag half full of cocaine. I don’t think it was the paper boy.”

“You’re sure it’s coke?”

“I didn’t taste it. But it sure as hell isn’t powdered sugar, and it looks like there are drops of dried blood in it.”

I felt a tightening in my stomach. “You get the impression we’re beyond the realm of coincidence?”

“Way beyond.”

“I’ll head over to the station and talk to Gary. Why don’t you—”

“Why don’t I wait at your house in case they want to send over some evidence techs.”

“Why didn’t I think of that?”

Harper cleared his throat, took on a stern tone. “Listen, Mitch, don’t be a smartass over at the station.”

“You sound like my grandfather.”

“Funny. But Gary might want you to talk to Lieutenant Valdes.”

“What do you know about him, anyway? I don’t remember Gary’s ever saying much about a Lieutenant Valdes.”

“The lieutenant is new in town. Other than that, I don’t know much more than you. But I hear she’s tough.”

“She?”

On my way to the police station, I mentally reviewed my case files on the three victims.

Melanie Sikona had hired me almost seven years ago. She’d been recently divorced from her husband. The court had determined that joint custody of their eight-year-old son was in order. Both parents were career oriented people willing to arrange their work schedules around caring for their son. Both had substantial incomes. But Melanie was alarmed by indications of strange behavior on the part of her ex-husband. After I watched him for a few

days, it was clear he was into drugs, using cocaine. I gathered some evidence, we went to court, and Melanie was given full custody of her son.

Terry Posada had been several years later. March of 1990. He'd wanted to locate his half-brother when their father died. The half-brother was a drifter with no current address. I made some long-distance phone calls and found him in half a day. It was quick and easy, and all I charged him for was the calls.

Claire Tatum first hired me in June of 1988. She was junior partner in a Phoenix law firm, and we'd been introduced by a mutual acquaintance. She often called me when she needed legwork on a court case. Sometimes I was too busy to take the work, but not often. We were not quite friends, but more than acquaintances.

When I got to the police station, the desk sergeant told me that Detective Gary Francis was busy working on a homicide and was not available to anyone. He also told me that I would have to talk to Lieutenant Valdes, and that I would have to wait, just like everyone else.

It was almost four thirty when I was finally sent back to speak with the lieutenant. We talked in her office.

At six one my eyes made level contact with hers, dark caramel behind glasses with oversize frames. Lines that were not yet deep enough to be called wrinkles came and went with her facial expressions. Her hair was tied back, as dark as red can be without looking brown. The suit she wore left absolutely everything to the imagination, but there was a certain energy to her, a color in her face, a way of moving that nothing could hide. I realized quickly that I was reacting to her on a more physical level than I wanted to. I wondered how many times she had drawn that reaction in the past, and consciously used it to her advantage.

I told her about the victims' being ex-clients, and about what Harper had found on my doorstep.

"You might want to send some people to check around the house," I said. "Harper should be there now. Whoever left the coke might've left something else by mistake."

"Oh really?"

"Yes. And—"

"Excuse me, Mr. Travers—"

"Mitch."

She took off her glasses and sized me up from under fierce eyebrows. "Mr. Travers, what makes you think this cocaine is connected to the homicides?"

I shrugged. "If not, it's quite a coincidence, don't you think?"

"I don't know. What kind of people do you associate with?"

I thought for a second. "Normally pimps and pushers, that sort of crowd."

"I'll ignore your sarcasm, this time."

"You deserved it."

We stared at each other until she shook her head. "You know, we won't have a single officer writing speeding tickets tonight, that's how thin we're spread. I get a phone call from the chief every forty-five minutes. I haven't slept more than three hours a night since Wednesday. Three people have been murdered and probably more are on the way. And now I'm supposed to find patience for some smartass private eye who tells me how to do my job, then tells me to call him Mitch?"

For a long moment the only sounds were of ringing phones and distant conversations. Quietly I said, "I've been here since one. A killer is stalking my clients. If that's making me rude and impatient, then I apologize. It's childish for us to waste time sparring with each other. If you doubt my character or reputation, you can talk to Gary Francis; he knows me. Otherwise, let's start over."

She picked up the phone. "What's your address?"

When I told her, she paused before dialing. "That's a pretty rich neighborhood for a P.I."

"I know; it's a little embarrassing. But I once did a favor for a rich old man who travels a lot. He owns it, stays there three months a year, and lets me take care of it."

"Well, I'll send some techs to check that coke and the area where it was found. In the meantime, why don't you summarize your case histories on the victims."

After I'd explained my work for each of the three, she leaned back and pursed her lips. "You see any connection between them?"

"Just that they all hired me."

"And Melanie Sikona's ex-husband had a coke habit. Would he be likely to blame you for losing custody of his son?"

"Deney was a car salesman, a business type. Even on drugs I can't see him killing people just to get even with me. And that's part of what's so strange here. If the killings are supposed to be revenge, why not come after me?"

"Maybe that's next."

"Thanks. I'll sleep better tonight."

"Sorry." She sort of smiled. "We can be insomniacs together."

I pulled a list from my pocket and set it on her desk. "These are names of people who might have a grudge against me."

She looked. "It's not very long."

"I didn't include all the women whose hearts I've broken."

She really smiled. "Gary said I'd like you. For awhile I thought he was going to be wrong."

"You talked to Gary about me?"

"I called him while you were waiting." There was no picture of a husband on her desk, no ring on her finger.

"I'm not sure how to react to you, Lieutenant Valdes."

"Pretend I'm a man. How long before you can get back here with all your case files?"

"About a minute."

She raised her eyebrows.

"They're in my car."

Valdes gathered officers to help us call my former clients. Those contacted were advised to lock their doors, avoid being alone, and make plans to visit someone out of town if possible.

We fed the computer my enemies list, and Valdes had the whereabouts of those suspects checked. No one of them seemed any more likely than the others, and none of them

seemed very likely at all. It was about eleven thirty when I climbed into the old Camaro and left the police station, headed for home.

It was about eleven thirty-two when I turned around and headed back to my office.

I went through the glass entry doors and jogged up the three flights of stairs to my office. After about five minutes I phoned Valdes at the station. "I thought you might have gone home," I said.

"This is home."

"It occurred to me that our friend with the knife must have gotten information about my clients from somewhere. I should've thought of it earlier. There are scratch marks on my file cabinet lock."

"How about the office door?"

"No, but he could have used a credit card. I did when I lost my keys."

"Okay, I'll send someone over in the morning, we'll check for prints—"

"Don't you think now would be—"

"Do I have to explain this again? Between tracking down possible leads, going over autopsy reports, checking rap sheets, increased street patrol, and looking for clients of yours we were unable to contact, there aren't enough officers here to start a card game, let

alone look at your damn filing cabinet."

"How about solitaire?"

"What?"

"Sorry. Lieutenant Valdes, let's hope we can both get some rest."

After we hung up, I decided I liked her. Then I wondered about my silly arrogance. How can you ever decide whether you like someone?

I trotted down the stairs and stopped just before opening the glass exit doors. I'd been so lost in sleepy thoughts and philosophy that I nearly missed the brief pinpoint of light from across the street, beyond the parking lot.

Judging by the intervals, I guessed the light to be a cigarette. Its location indicated someone sitting in a car, possibly hanging an arm out the window. It looked maybe thirty yards away, off on an angle to my right. After a time I could make out whitewall tires and a dim shape behind the wheel. Keeping sight of him, I went to my car and started the engine. I let it idle for a moment, killed it, and headed back to the building as if I'd forgotten something. I heard his engine turn off.

I left through the back and set out in a wide, swooping arc. I ran, realizing how out of shape I'd gotten in the past

months. When I finally swung around, I was twenty yards behind him. I stayed there until my breath came back, then got down low and made my way toward the car. The adrenaline thrill stayed with me, cool electricity in my veins.

Soft music from the car covered any sound I might have made. I crawled the final ten yards, brought myself snug against the driver's rear tire. I'd gotten the license number. The car was an old green Catalina, a boat. All I could see of the driver was dark hair. And no watch on his left wrist as it hung down alongside the door, now with a fresh cigarette.

I stared at his arm long enough to visualize exactly where I would clamp my hands tight, near the wrist. Then I grabbed his arm, twisting hard and pulling. The cigarette fell, and he made a sudden gasping sound. I grabbed at the door handle, hoping it was unlocked. It swung open, and in the dome light his eyes were wide with shock. Still holding the arm, I took him to the ground. He was light as a twig, with sunken eye sockets and the rickety look of a junkie. His eyes turned wild as he realized who I was but not where I'd come from. I picked up the cigarette, still lit, and sat with my knees on his chest.

"Start with why you're watching me." I held the cigarette close to his face.

"R-relax, I wasn't watching you. I mean I was, but that don't mean nothing. I just wanted to know who you was."

"Did you know who Melanie Sikona was before you killed her?"

His face contorted in fear and confusion. "I don't know what you're talking about. I never seen you before tonight. Up close, I mean."

"Then we're back to question one. Why were you watching me?"

When he failed to answer I leaned toward the cigarette, blowing at the tip. Ashes settled on his face.

"Man, you're burnin' me." He twisted under my weight.

"So answer the question."

"Honest to God I never seen you—just your car, last week. The night Frank Page got hit, I seen you peeling off from in front of the Embassy."

"Keep going."

"A cop I know pays for tips. He might want to know whose car it was peeling away from the hotel where Page got it. I been hanging out, watching to see if I see that car again, figuring the guy who done it might be local, just hoping because the car had Arizona plates. I just seen you a ways

back, crossing Van Buren on your way here. I was following you to find out who you was."

For a moment I thought I should push him, then decided against it. There was no reason to believe he knew more than he was telling, and I felt very tired. "You think I killed Frank Page?" I said, easing my knee off his chest.

"I don't think nothing anymore, I swear. If you let me go, I won't say nothing."

I threw away the cigarette. "Anything."

At one thirty I was finally home, having sped the whole way after recalling what Valdes said about officers and speeding tickets. Memory of the drive blurred as my head fell toward the pillow. Yet I knew the city streets had been unnaturally empty, the houses all dark. I wondered if there had ever been a night in the history of the world when no one had died.

It was my last conscious thought before falling into a sleep too deep for nightmares.

On Sunday morning I walked down the zig-zagging road to Harper's. Radio and newspapers had made no mention of any further killings. I called out as I let myself in, as

usual. He was in the kitchen, brewing up some of his self-proclaimed legendary coffee. We drank from thick mugs while I told him about my friend in the Catalina.

"Curiouser and curiouser." His hand made a sandpaper sound as it rubbed his face.

"All I know about Frank Page is that he was a bigtime coke dealer. I didn't even know he'd been killed."

"I read about it. It happened last Saturday, the night before you left town."

"At the Embassy Hotel?"

"I think so. Could it have been your car the guy saw that night?"

I nodded. "We were playing at the Sand Shark, right next door. But I don't know what time Page was hit. And I certainly didn't peel off down the street when I left."

The morning sunlight reflected off Harper's glasses. "Then maybe he saw a car that only looked like yours."

I took my time thinking it through. "It wouldn't be too hard to make any Camaro look like mine . . . spray it with water, take a long drive through the valley."

"So who would want to set you up? An old enemy?"

I shrugged. "Or a new one. Someone needing a fall guy for Frank Page's murder."

Harper nodded his approval of my thinking. "But it doesn't get us any closer to the serial killings."

"No. But somehow I link everything together. The victims are my clients, a car like mine was seen when Page was killed, a bag of cocaine was left on my porch."

"And Frank Page was a coke dealer."

"And Deney Sikona did coke." I took a swallow of strong, biting coffee. "It's been seven years since I've seen him, but he didn't seem the type to plan a murder. I'm still not seeing any overall framework. Can you get some information on Page, whatever's on the street?"

"I've got a few connections left, sure."

We were quiet for awhile, looking out at the valley, the expanse of houses and large office buildings. The glitter of glass in the desert.

"This is a weird one, Harp," I finally said. "I'm more used to sneaking up on people. Now I keep trying to guess who's behind me."

"Such a dangerous game we play." He sipped from his mug. "I think you're worried because you like it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you like the risk. Maybe not so much the vio-

lence, or the action itself, but the *chance* of it. The awareness that it *might* happen. The feeling of exhilaration. It's why I stayed a cop so long."

I shook my head. "It's also what prompted my retirement a few months ago. I couldn't help thinking there's something sick about that feeling, about needing that feeling. I still can't."

"Why judge it? You are what you are. Better for you to do this than to do something else and die of never finding the right life."

He let it go at that. And I finished the good coffee, thinking that I would die anyway.

Detective Gary Francis was not thrilled when I knocked at the door of his house. I expected his wife to answer, but Gary appeared, unblinking in a white undershirt, dark hair standing in a thousand different directions, stubble sprinkled over his jowls.

"Good morning, Gary."

"I was sleeping." Mechanical delivery, almost robotic. "I hadn't been to sleep for two days."

"Aren't you going to invite me in?"

He didn't budge.

"Travers, be quick. I've got to get back to bed."

"You make it sound urgent. Did I interrupt a naughty dream? Where's Debbie, anyway?"

"She took the kids to her mother's so I could sleep. Valdes has been running us ragged."

"Come up with anything?"

"Talk to Valdes. She'll tell you everything." He shut the door and I had to knock again.

"I was sleeping."

"Gary, they said at the station you were in charge of the Frank Page homicide. I wondered if you could—" I stopped because his laughter drowned out my voice.

"Frank *who*? Mitch, there's a serial killer out there cutting real citizens to ribbons, people with families. You think we're doing anything about a piece of trash like Frank Page? Your concern is touching, but misplaced. Worry about the real people, we'll take care of the dirt later."

"Couldn't there be a connection?"

"What connection? Page was shot to death at close range with a .38. Three times, but the first probably did it. It was three days before the knife killings. Word is there was a contract on him. It was a drug killing, that's it."

"He was local, right?"

Gary ran a hand through his hair, took a moment to think. "He owned a house out on I-40, I think. By the Hualapai reservation."

"You've been there?"

"No, but I've heard. It's a good location for him, out of the way, three hours from Phoenix, a couple hours from Vegas. And he had a wife and a live-in bodyguard named Jimmy Martoya, if it matters."

"It might."

I expected him to close the door again, but he stood there with a thoughtful expression. "Valdes called me yesterday to ask about you."

"What did she want to know?"

"Oh nothing much. Just personal stuff." His mouth spread into a wolfish grin. "Do you know she's single?"

"I hadn't wondered."

"Uh-huh. I'm going back to bed. Maybe Debbie and I will invite you two for dinner sometime."

Before he got the door closed I asked him how I could reach Valdes. He gave me a phone number and told me it was her pager. "Don't tell her where you got this number. Now can I please get some sleep?"

I went to the car dealership where Deney Sikona had been employed. I figured it would be open but had no idea if Deney

still worked there. As it turned out, I was lucky. He approached before I was out of my car and acted like he didn't know me. His hair was slick, his suit cheap.

"That's some kind of beast you've got there." He nodded at the Camaro, extended his hand, and told me to call him Den. He had the familiar friendliness, the fake just-between-you-and-me tone characteristic of so many sales people. I told him I wasn't interested in a new car.

"Well, we've got some decent used cars—"

"I mean I'm not interested in cars at all. I just want to talk."

He finally paused. "You're a cop. How many times am I going to have to do this? Come on, I've got an office inside."

I waited until we were seated before telling him I was a private investigator. "We never really met," I said, "But I was the one who gave Melanie's lawyer evidence of your cocaine problem."

He shifted in his chair, closed his eyes. If all this was an act, he was good.

"Now I remember. You testified against me. They gave her my son."

"Are you going to get him back because of... what happened to Melanie?"

The answer came slowly. "I don't know. A social worker has to do an evaluation."

"But you're clean now?"

"Look, what are you doing here? I've had cops asking me questions since it happened. I don't see why I should talk to you."

"Did you know a man named Frank Page?"

His eyes darted wildly, as if the answer were written on a wall behind me. "No," he said. "And I'd rather not talk without a lawyer present." He stood up.

"Give me a reason why you won't talk," I said, "so I don't think it's because you want Melanie's killer on the loose."

"A reason? How about I want my son back? How about you're the son of a bitch who took him away to begin with?"

As I was leaving, he mumbled something. I turned back.

"I hadn't seen Melanie in a long time." He looked at me. "I was surprised she kept the last name."

"Maybe so it wouldn't confuse your son."

"Yeah, maybe. I imagine he's pretty confused anyway."

During a lunch of fajitas, I overheard scraps of conversation about the killer at large. All were tainted with the same giddiness, the same undercur-

rent of horrified fascination. The same ugly interest in death that causes us all to steal a glimpse as we pass the scene of an accident.

I paged Valdes from the restaurant, and she returned the call within three minutes.

"Yes, this is Lieutenant Valdes, I was paged at this number—"

"It's me, Mitch Travers."

A pause. "Who gave you this number?"

"I'm a detective. My methods are confidential."

Another pause. "Where are you, anyway?"

"Downtown, at a place called Fina Cocina. They serve great fajitas and Dos Equis beer. But I'm calling to see if you'll tell me anything new about the investigation."

"I'm not really sure I should."

"Come on, lieutenant. The more we work together, the faster we catch our killer."

I could almost hear her sigh. "The blood in that bag of cocaine belonged to Melanie Sikonka. The evidence people couldn't find anything at your office, but the autopsy reports suggest that he's a left-handed male. Same murder weapon each time, probably a butcher knife. He's not stupid, obviously, or else he would have already been caught. He watches his victims before he strikes.

That's probably why he didn't get anyone last night—he could have spotted one of our surveillance nets. We also think he's doing this for a specific purpose, probably as an act of vengeance toward you."

"What makes you think so?"

"It's the pattern of the killings, Mitch. He's not following behavior norms of a sex killer or psychotic. Most serial killers stay within their own ethnic group, this one doesn't. Most choose victims who are all the same sex, this one doesn't. The pattern is too calculated. The coke was a message to you, so are the killings."

"A message I don't understand."

"You haven't come up with any leads? Nothing that could in any way be related?"

I thought of the snitch in the Catalina and the possible connection to Frank Page. "I might have something in a few hours. Where can I reach you?"

She sounded annoyed. "What might you have in a few hours that you don't have now?"

"A lead or two, instead of wild conjecture. While I'm thinking of it, what have you got on Deney Sikona?"

"You said he wasn't the type."

"He's not the type for serial killings. But I'm beginning to think he might be the type to

set me up. I just talked to him and I'm sure he lied about something."

She was silent for a moment. "He's got an alibi for Saturday night, but it's not airtight. We're checking on it."

"Let me know what turns up. Are you going to be at the station or should I page you again?"

"Page me."

I kept the car in second gear while climbing the steep switchbacks leading to Frank Page's house. It was on a ridge between the Peacock Mountains and Hualapai reservation. I'd asked a few quiet questions at a diner in Kingman and gotten good directions. The entire trip from Phoenix had been long, three hours, and now that it was almost dusk, my car passed in and out of long shadows. The house towered at the end of the road, on a plateau that made room for a big pool in back. From the outside I could see into a living room through a series of cathedral windows that looked out on a spectacular view. I wondered how much it had cost Page to buy the house, then realized you didn't buy houses like this. You had them built.

I rang the bell and waited. There were two cars in the cir-

cle drive, a red Ferrari and a powder blue Ford Escort. A middle-aged woman with dark hair opened the door. She had the look, and accent, of a housekeeper. "Yes?"

"Are you Mrs. Page?"

"Mrs. Page is out by the pool. May I tell her who's calling?"

I gave her one of my old business cards, and she let me step inside the foyer to wait. The interior decorations were as expensive and ornate as the outside. A sweeping staircase curved upwards to my left, the vaulted ceiling high enough that I could see part of an upstairs hallway from where I stood. Flowers and cactus plants encircled the foyer area, some growing out of specially designed trenches in the floor, some planted in adobe style pottery.

Mrs. Page followed the housekeeper into the foyer and dismissed her, saying, "That's all, Maria." Then she turned to me and said, "I'm Maggie Page." No tone of welcome in her voice, but also no fear or apprehension. Very bold.

I could see her black one-piece under a sheer sun robe that fell to just below her waist. She held a good tan for a redhead and wore high-heeled shoes in which she seemed very comfortable. Her muscle tone was good, her manner and

movements conveying an awareness of sexual power. Her fingernails were long and well manicured. I wondered what strip joint Frank had found her in.

"Mrs. Page, is there somewhere we can sit and talk?"

"We can talk here." Very cool. "What do you want?"

"I understand your husband was murdered last week. There may be something I can do about it."

"Frank's dead, Mr. Travers. What can you do about that?" She produced a lighter and cigarette from an invisible pocket in the sun robe.

"Find out who killed him. Did your husband have many enemies?" I kept my voice innocent.

"My husband was one hell of a businessman," she looked around the foyer, "as you can see. People were jealous of us, people he worked with. But I don't see what any of it has to do with you."

"Neither do I, Mrs. Page. Not yet. Do you know why your husband was staying at the Embassy Hotel that night?"

She gave an impatient sigh, sucked once on the cigarette. "Frank had business there. He didn't want to drive three hours home that late at night. You know, I don't know why you're here, and I don't know why I'm

answering any of these questions. Please leave."

"I will. Thanks for your time." As I turned to leave, I thought she smiled. But when I turned back she was expressionless. "One last question. Where can I find Jimmy Martoya?"

If she was cool before, she was pure ice now. "Jimmy Martoya doesn't live here." It was all she was going to say.

"Thanks again, Mrs. Page. I'll let you get back to your grieving."

Before driving away I found a pen in my car and wrote on one of my business cards. *Maria, meet me at the diner in Kingman. Please come.* I stuck the card under the windshield wiper of the blue Escort and drove down the mountain road. When I came to a suitable place, I turned off the road to wait. It was nearly seven o'clock before she drove by.

I followed her to the diner I'd discovered on the drive in. As she got out of her car I approached and said her name, surprising her without meaning to. She looked left and right, eyes registering alarm. In hushed tones she said that she would be fired if we were seen by Mrs. Page. I did my best to be reassuring and was finally able to calm her. We sat

in a corner booth of the diner. She avoided eye contact.

"Maria, why are you afraid of Mrs. Page?"

No answer. A waitress came, and I ordered us coffee. "Maria, Mrs. Page did not seem like a very nice person to me. Her husband wasn't a nice person either. But I need to find out who killed him. Some lives might depend on it."

The inner conflict played itself out in front of me. She fidgeted, sighed, stared at the floor. I tried to imagine what she was going through. Page would have picked a poor woman, probably uneducated, with several children and no husband. One who would need the money badly enough to do as she was told, without thought of where her wages came from, or the integrity of her employer. In her own way and in her own household, she might be an esteemed and powerful matriarch. But in the Page residence she would be humble and obedient, clinging to the job that was her survival.

"Maria, I think you want to help me. Or else you wouldn't have come." The waitress brought the coffee. I sipped from mine, watching her.

"Ask your questions." Her gaze focused on the steam rising from her cup.

"First of all, I'm not here to bust Mrs. Page or anyone else for their involvement with drugs. I only want to know who killed Frank. I don't know if you or Mrs. Page has any idea about that. But you might know something without realizing it. Did you ever hear Frank talk about his business?"

She shook her head. "He never talked business in his house. Mrs. Page, she would sometimes ask, but he said never business in the house. That was his rule."

"In the few days before last Saturday did he seem at all nervous?"

Again she shook her head. "I heard him tell her he had business and he wanted to stay all night at the hotel. He didn't seem nervous at all."

"Was Mrs. Page upset when Frank said he wanted to stay all night at the hotel?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

I sipped the coffee and tried to think of a new line of questions, all too aware this was getting me nothing. Then again, maybe there was nothing to get. "Maria, what about a man named Jimmy Martoya? Did he live in the house?"

She was in the process of raising her cup and a tremble nearly spilled the coffee. She

set the cup down. "Jimmy, he has not been around since Mr. Page died. He lived in the house, yes. He was always with Mr. Page. Everywhere Mr. Page went, there was Jimmy. Mr. Travers, they were not..." she stopped, then found the words, "they were not normal."

"Who? Jimmy and Frank?"

"Mrs. Page either. None of them." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Jimmy and Mr. Page would sometimes be in the study, during the day, for a very long time. And Mrs. Page out by the pool, she'd tell me to listen at the door, find out what they said so I could tell her. Sometimes they talked, but it never meant anything to me. Names, places, nothing that seemed important. But sometimes they did not talk. Sometimes there were only certain sounds, and when I heard them I did not listen any more."

"Can you make sure I understand what you're saying, Maria?"

She thought for a moment. "Mr. Travers, sometimes I would see the way Jimmy looked at Mr. Page, and it was the way a boy looks at his father. Other times it was like... the way a woman looks at a man. Do you understand?"

"I think so. Did you ever see Jimmy with other men?"

"No, no. He did not look that way, he was very much like a man, a strong man. Even bigger than you. Often he was with women. It was only sometimes with Mr. Page that he was that other way."

"Did Jimmy use drugs?"

"I think so, yes. Sometimes at the house they would have parties and there would be cocaine."

"And you haven't seen him since before last Saturday?"

She shook her head. I reached across the table and patted her arm. "Thank you," I said. We walked out together.

I watched her get into her car. "I hope you don't feel I got you in trouble."

She shrugged. "I was worried, but... whatever happens, happens. I'll survive."

I thought of one last question before leaving, and as I drove back toward my office I kept hearing her answer. "Jimmy? He was left-handed. What a strange thing to ask."

At eleven thirty I phoned Harper from my office. No answer. I paged Valdes. When she hadn't called back after fifteen minutes, I tried Harper once more, and this time he answered.

"Where the hell have you been? I was almost worried," I said.

"Almost? I'm flattered. I walked in the door just this second. I'm afraid I didn't get a whole lot on Page."

"Anything could help."

He cleared his throat. "All right, here's what I did get. He was at the Embassy Saturday evening, with his bodyguard Martoya. And there was something unusual going on with them. They—"

"I know about them."

"Well, what the hell? Did I call in all my old favors for nothing?"

I couldn't suppress a grin. "Sorry. Keep going."

"Anyway, Page cut a deal with a guy from Miami whose name I didn't get. The deal was done earlier in the evening, dinnertime. The Miami guy left, and Page and Martoya were seen at the Sand Shark, enjoying the sounds of the Desert Sand Band." He paused. "Apparently they stayed the night at the hotel because it was convenient. In more ways than one, if you know what I mean."

"Time away from the wife," I said. "What else?"

"Page was hit around one o'clock that morning. Someone put out a contract on him earlier that day, which is awful fast. You don't hit Frank Page without a well conceived plan,

and one day just isn't enough time."

"So whoever put out the contract already had a plan in mind, like framing me?"

"I'd say. And if that street punk saw a car like yours peel away from the scene, you can bet Martoya knows about it, too. And you can bet he was meant to."

"Any way to find him?"

"He's around, but no one seems to know where. Judging by his relationship with Page, I'd say he's our best candidate for killer of the month."

I took a deep breath. "I think so, too. Listen, Joe. I need you to do me one last favor, as soon as you can. I'll explain when I see you, probably tomorrow morning."

"What do you need?"

"I need you to put out a contract on me."

It was another fifteen minutes before Valdes called back. I answered the phone by saying, "What took so long?"

"We found another body two hours ago. Really cut up."

"Identification?"

"It's not yet officially confirmed, but his name was Clarence Crandall. A client?"

I tried to keep it out, to pretend it was only a name. "From way back. And also a friend—" I lost my voice, then fought to

get it back. "Jesus, I saw him for lunch not two weeks ago."

She started to say something but stopped. I wasn't sure if she was giving me time to recover or just didn't know what to say. Finally I said, "Lieutenant, I need to talk to you. Can we meet at the station?"

"I just got home from there. I see too much of that place." She hesitated. "I'm sort of in the middle of something here, but I guess it would be all right if you came by."

After she gave directions, I told her to put out an APB on Jimmy Martoya.

"Who?"

"He was Frank Page's bodyguard, among other things. I'll explain when I get there, but please put out the bulletin."

A light rain misted my windshield as I drove to her apartment. An eerie desolation spread over the city, and the only traffic sounds were the hum of an engine and the swish of my tires on wet pavement.

I found myself thinking of the last few days. Not the events—I'd already gone over those a thousand times—but the shape and texture of the days. Life has a certain feel, a flavor that varies according to daily routines. When I was with the band, life was slow. Simple. Sleep in, let morning and afternoon fade, then feel

the rhythm in dark places that smelled of people and smoke. That had changed. Now life had an urgency, a frantic, fever pitch with all the feel of a nightmare. And resist as I might, I felt my thoughts turn to Clarence Crandall, victim four.

I was glad to find the lieutenant's apartment before having too much time to think about him.

She asked who it was, looked through the eyehole, and rattled the chain loose. Her apartment was on the ground level and looked well kept, with large rooms, fresh carpet and a hardwood kitchen floor. Framed pictures of family and friends hung around the living room walls. Her hair was tied back, and she wore gray sweat bottoms with a T-shirt that said LAPD. There was also a piano.

"I put out the APB on Martoya." She motioned to the couch, then sat next to me, right foot curled under left leg. "What's it all about?"

I told her of my encounter with the snitch, then of my trip to the Page household and my talk with Maria.

"So you think it's Martoya, with a motive of revenge for Page's murder?"

"It fits better than anything else."

"But we still don't know who set you up as Page's killer."

I shook my head. "Anything on Deney Sikona?"

"His alibi for Saturday night checks out, though it looks like he did have an indirect connection to Page. We've got the name of a distributor who sold to Deney and was supplied by Page."

"Then Deney's still using?"

She nodded. "That's the word. Social services will find a foster home for the son. We've been too busy with the killings to check on the distributor yet. His name is Garriss Broom."

I almost laughed. "Are you sure?"

"Would you forget a name like that? Anyway, we have to focus on Martoya for now." She went to the kitchen and fixed a drink. "Would you like something?"

She had Killian's. I took it in the bottle.

She came back to the couch. "If you're right about Martoya, he'll eventually come after you."

I shrugged. "Eventually. It's all uneducated psychological guesswork on my part. Part of that guesswork is that Martoya never had a father figure of any sort, nothing to guide him, not even the social structure of a street gang... until Frank Page came along. Then Page

became his father, supplier, and eventually his lover. A lot of their relationship was probably due to Jimmy's drug habit, but much of it was probably also true affection, even love. Either way, the only explanation that fits is that Page was the all-important figure in Jimmy Martoya's life, the only thing giving it meaning. The death of that figure has turned him into a killing machine. And if Page was as important to him as I think, chances are revenge is the only thing giving meaning to his life now. He may decide to make it last as long as he can."

"So he's choosing victims from your pool of clients at random?"

"Or in a drug demented pattern that we'd never understand. The problem is, he may plan to go after ten more before coming after me. Or twenty or thirty, there's no way of telling."

She tapped her chin with an index finger. "He's been very elusive, Mitch. We may not be able to find him, not right away."

I sipped my beer. "That's why I set up a way to draw him in. You'll have to get some kind of surveillance net around my house."

"What for?"

"I had Joe Harper put out a contract on me. Martoya would never take a chance on someone else getting to me first."

For a moment it seemed she fought to keep her composure. She shook her head and took a swallow of her drink. "Do you have any idea how dangerous that is? Mitch, he's already killed four people and avoided capture. And if you're right about his state of mind, he'll keep coming after you until you're dead."

"But if this is done right, he won't know what hit him. Besides, how many others might he kill in the time it takes to catch him any other way? As soon as I get home, I'm not leaving. Your team will have time to position itself. Are they so incompetent as to let him come walking into my house and kill me?"

Another shake of her head, a glance at me, then another swallow of drink. "Adolescent macho idiocy," she said.

"Maybe. But you know it can work."

After an interval of silence long enough to make me uncomfortable, she excused herself to make the calls necessary for setting up the surveillance team.

I walked the perimeter of the living room, looking at the family pictures that lined the

walls. There was a nice one taken at her college graduation. Mom, Dad, Carson, and two brothers. When she was off the phone, she told me one of the brothers turned out to be a cop, like her and her father. The family lived in Los Angeles, and when I asked, she told me something about each of them. She talked most about her father, who died ten years ago in the line of duty.

I kept feeling ready to leave, but there was another beer in my hand, then another. I realized we'd been talking for a very long time and that I was noticing things about her. The way she moved her hands to explain a story, the quick smiles at her own jokes and the sad eyes for her father. And I told her about my grandfather, and how he'd raised me in northern Michigan. She listened well and sat close. A small voice inside my head said to be careful. I told it to shut up.

She talked about how she'd almost been married. Her job had stopped it. "It takes a certain kind of person to be married to a cop," she said.

"Someone like your mom?"

She smiled, nodded. I looked at the piano and asked if she played.

"Just a little, for myself. My mother made me take lessons as a kid. I liked it, but I didn't

turn into much of a musician. Certainly not in your class, anyway."

"Were you playing when I paged you? You said you were in the middle of something."

She thought for a moment. "Oh, no. I was looking for Tubbs."

"Tubbs?"

"My cat. He ran away this morning."

"I'm sorry."

She gave a half nod, looking down. Then a slow smile curled her lips. "Are you uncomfortable, being here?"

"Why should I be uncomfortable?"

"I don't know. It's just that I sometimes get uncomfortable when something starts going too well, kind of like now. I mean with us, talking. I wondered if that ever happens to you."

"I guess I hadn't thought about it."

"Gary said you don't date many women."

"I can see Gary and I have to talk. What else did he say?"

"That you needed someone." Caramel eyes.

An awareness of subtle changes in body tension and position. "Let's be honest, lieutenant. Whose love life couldn't be improved?"

"It's after hours. You can stop with the lieutenant thing now."

"Carson," I said, leaning toward her.

A dream woke me. I grabbed for the memory and caught only a fragment. Something about the dog I used to have. Long ago, when I had that dog and was a kid, I used to play a game of imagining different worlds and different versions of Mitch Travers. Maybe now there was one who was a true musician, who was married and had kids. One whose parents hadn't been killed in an accident. Somehow I'd ended up the one whose affiliation with people was getting them killed, the one who was the son of a bitch that took Deney Sikona's kid from him.

The only light in the room was from Carson's digital clock. It was four thirty. One of my hands rested on the small of her back. After a time of staring at the ceiling I said, "I want this to work."

The phone rang that morning, and she was told the operating details of the surveillance team. We discussed it over coffee. All along there was the dual awareness of words unspoken, of our hiding behind the concerns of the moment. Perhaps we both knew that if we talked about the night be-

fore, our words could be as clichéd as the situation.

The team would be in place by afternoon. Four unmarked stationary units would have a direct view of the house, two from the switchback above, two from the switchback below. There were also two units on my switchback, one just past the house and one just before. Six units in all, three cars and three vans. Eighteen police officers. Plus a handful of patrol cars within a three minute travel radius.

"I won't know what to do with all the attention," I told her, staring into my coffee cup.

"Just go about your normal routine without leaving the street. He'll never even set foot on your porch." When she put her hand on my arm, I looked up to meet her eyes. Her head was turned away.

Once again behind the wheel of the Camaro, I felt surprisingly renewed. It could have been the impending action, the anticipation of risk as Harper had called it. Or it could have been the night with Carson Valdes. Or a combination of both. Whatever the case, my fresh state of mind made me ambitious. It was not quite eleven, and the surveillance team wouldn't be in place for at least an hour. Of course there was no guarantee that Martoya

would find out about the contract today, or even become aware of it at all. But either way, I decided I had time to locate Garris Broom.

At a quarter to twelve I found him in a pool hall. He was shooting alone, and I stood by his table without picking up a house cue. The place smelled of mildew, and so did Garris.

"You going to rack or what?"

He looked me over.

"Or what?" I said.

"Aw, man, you're a cop." He started racking. "I didn't do nothing."

"You sold stuff to Deney Sikona. You got stuff from Frank Page. And I'm not a cop."

"What, then?"

"Just someone who needs information. Who knows, if you help me maybe I'll give you some business."

He lined up the cue ball to break. "How'd you find me?"

"Your sister said you'd be shooting pool, and this is the only hall open before noon."

"How'd you know where I live?"

"You're in the phone book. How did Deney know Frank?"

"I said the name to him once, to brag. Told him I got my snow from a big man, that it was quality. Desert snow that won't melt and go bad in this heat like the stuff he'd get from someone else."

"It goes bad in heat?"

He laughed. "You say whatever sells it, Holmes."

"So that's it? Deney never met Frank?"

"Not that I know."

At five after twelve I headed home. To avoid the nervous anticipation thoughts of Martoya would bring, I focused my attention elsewhere. Carson Valdes, namely. I looked at mental snapshots from the night before. The curve as she lay on her side, the untied hair spilled onto her pillow. The twist of her mouth seen only by colored light from a digital clock.

And then I had a romantic notion, something of which Harper and Gary Francis believe me incapable. I actually wondered about the nearest place I could order a bouquet of roses.

I was still thinking about roses when I neared home. A patrol unit cruised past me as I turned onto Camelback. Starting up the initial incline, I could see a parked van on the switchback above, the first of the stationary units. It occurred to me that I didn't know if Carson was with the surveillance team. It also occurred to me that I'd never told Harper why I wanted the contract. I jogged into his house through

the front door, calling out my arrival.

Blood was all over the walls, smeared like fingerprinting. I went down on one knee, fighting not to get sick. The air had a thickness and there was a fresh metallic smell from blood on the tile floor, close to my face. I fought for breath and began moving through the house, working my way back to an up-right walk.

The blood on the floor had been drawn as a thin, distinct trail. It took me to the kitchen, then the living room, then down the stairs to the basement. There was enough sunlight for me to see the trail leading to the crawlspace. The little entrance door stood open, revealing darkness. Wild thoughts flashed through me like bright light. I needed to find Harper, I needed to know if the roses meant what I thought they did, I needed to know if this was real. I needed to know how much blood the human body could lose and not die.

I had the thought of running from the house, hollering for the police. Then a moment of self-loathing as I realized Harper must be in the crawlspace, maybe holding on, maybe without time for the cavalry. I realized he was the bait. But he was also Harper.

The light switch did nothing. No sense searching for a flashlight. It would take time, and Martoya might have thought of it. I crouched under the three and a half foot ceiling, moving on my feet rather than my knees. I guessed the crawlspace to be eight feet by nine or ten, with a furnace smack in the middle. When I was far enough in for the light from the open door to be of no use, I held still. Someone else was breathing in there.

I expected him to draw it out, to make it like torture so I would beg him to kill me. I started to whisper, not trusting my vocal cords. "Jimmy, I wasn't the one. Do you hear me? I didn't kill Frank." My hands were cold and moist. "It was his wife."

No response. Still the breathing. Where were Harper's climbing tools? I strained to see through the dark, found the strength to use my voice. "Don't you see? She set us up, Jimmy. We were all at the Sand Shark that night. You saw a waiter give me a box. You were supposed to think it was a payoff, but it was just a bunch of roses. Later on someone told you a dirty Camaro peeled away from where Frank got hit. You were supposed to figure out it was mine, but it wasn't."

I kept talking, now moving sideways, my back to the wall. I went toward the breathing, lifting my feet and placing them lightly, still in a crouch. My thighs burned. "She must have picked me because I would be in the right bar on the right night, and my car makes me easy to identify."

My hand bumped a coil of climbing rope set against the wall. The breathing was directly in front of me, now labored. "Think it through," I said. "She could have found out about me any number of ways. And there's no telling what a jealous woman will do, right, Jimmy? She had all the motive in the world, didn't she? How many other people knew about you and Frank? How many others stood to gain as much from his will? And of them, how many knew where you and Frank would be all Saturday night?"

I felt beyond the rope. My fingers touched the rubber grip of a hand pick. "And who else could have separated you from Frank? You were his bodyguard, and the two of you were in a hotel. There's no reason you would have left him, unless it was for someone you both knew. How did it happen, Jimmy? Did she call up to the room and get Frank to send you out on some flimsy pretext? Did

you hear the shots and rush in to find Frank dead? Come on, Jimmy, answer me. Does she own a .38?"

The pick was in my right hand. I probed forward with my left, toward the breathing. There was nothing but air, and probably the furnace, just beyond. I moved my hand downward and it touched a familiar pair of glasses, then a face. I felt his shape, lying on the floor. I sank down, nearly on top of him, hoping he was conscious. "Harp," I said. "Just hang on. He's around the other side of the furnace."

I realized too late that the face I'd felt was too smooth. He whispered that I was a liar and then there was the sound of a cigarette lighter, a flash of his smile, and a glimpse of his face, hollow and cruel behind Harper's glasses. The light flickered off and he jerked upward, ripping a deep pain through my right side. He drew back his arm and I felt his body tense for another thrust. But I was still on top, and for all his sadistic choreography, he had not planned on the pick.

I used it until I was sure.

Idrove to Carson's apartment in the bright sunshine of Friday morning. I had not seen her since Monday evening. We'd talked

briefly after that, on the phone, only to agree we'd wait until the immediate aftermath was over. We'd planned on going out to breakfast.

It had been four days, and Harper was going to make it. I'd found him in a closet left to bleed to death. I don't know why Martoya didn't kill him instantly. Perhaps he saw it as another way of prolonging his vengeance, but we'd never know for sure. He'd taken his secrets to the grave Wednesday night, due to wounds received in our struggle. My only regret was that four good people had preceded him.

Mrs. Maggie Page was brought into custody Monday evening. Detectives had obtained a warrant and found a .38 caliber revolver in the house. Carson had mentioned that the D.A.'s case looked good. And as I drove to Carson's place, I once again found myself thinking of the pace and rhythm of life. I was looking forward to its slowing down.

Her door opened as I approached. She was on her way out. I noticed she'd left a window open.

"Bad example for a police officer to set," I said. "Don't you tell people to lock up when they leave?"

"That's for Tubbs," she said. "I keep hoping he'll come back. How's the side?"

"Still sore. It's all stitched up, but he tore some muscle tissue. Weren't we supposed to have breakfast? You look like you were about to leave without me."

She wore sunglasses, and I couldn't see her eyes. "I tried calling," she said, "but you'd already left. We've got a warrant on this guy no one seems able to locate. He's wanted for a homicide two years ago, and we found some new evidence that—are you okay? You're looking at me kind of strange."

"I know. I can see my reflection in your sunglasses. I'm wondering if my look is the same as yours that morning, last Monday."

"I don't remember."

"We were talking about the surveillance team. You put your hand on my arm, and when I looked up, your face was turned away. I think you were hiding a look, an expression."

She removed her sunglasses and raised her eyebrows, trying to remember.

"These looks," I stopped to think, "make me wonder if either of us can deal with the lifestyle of the other."

After a pause she said, "It wasn't easy for me. Knowing Martoya was coming after you and that you . . . were letting it happen."

"I had to let it happen to stop it."

"I know. But what about the next Martoya and the one after that? There's something about that kind of risk that seems to appeal to you. It's something I don't think you can ever give up."

"Maybe. But what about you? Wouldn't you put me in the same position every time you left for work? How would I know you wouldn't be killed in the line of duty on any given day?"

We stood squinting at each other.

"Standoff," she finally said. "But . . . it never hurts to try."

She left, and I stood against my car. The sun felt good on my back. I thought about Carson,

about Harper, and about how to find the right life. When I was finally about to leave, I noticed a small cat creeping along the side of my car. He had no collar and looked hungry. It didn't occur to me until after I'd scooped him up and put him through Carson's open window that he might not be her cat. I imagined Carson returning home to find a strange cat enjoying her hospitality. Couldn't help smiling.

So I drove away from there, wondering first about cats and then about the last few months, and whether I'd been thinking too much about choosing my profession. After all, maybe the right life isn't something you find.

Maybe it's something you just come back to.

FICTION



Tomb

by George C. Chesbro

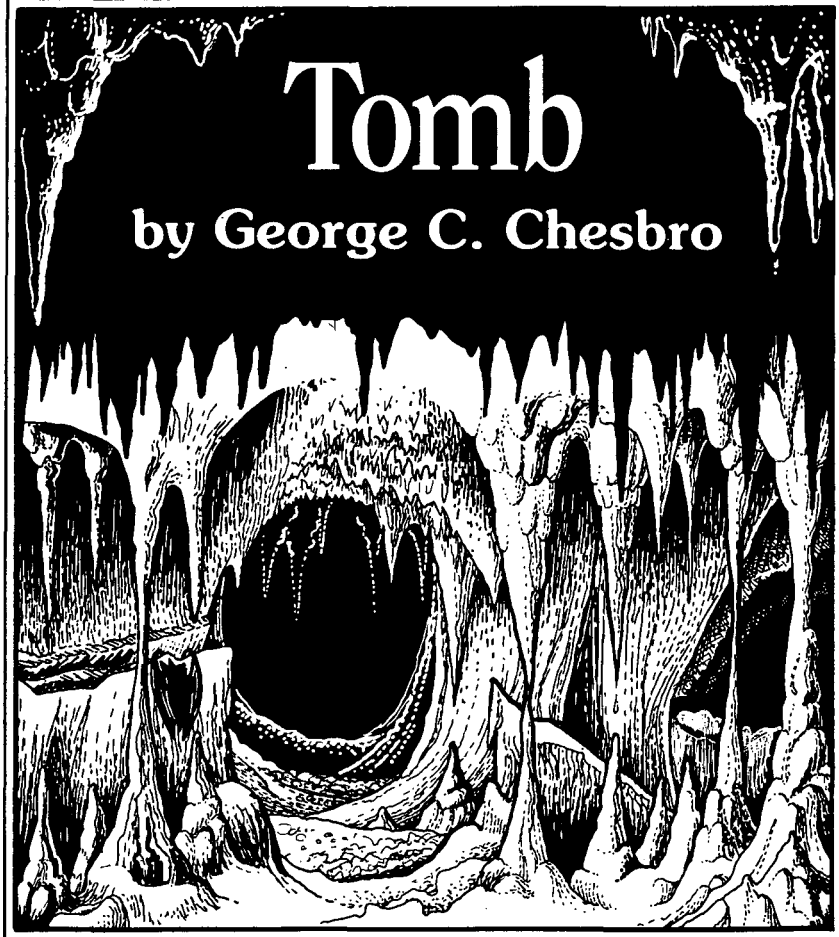


Illustration by Laurie Davis

Somehow he had to find a way to do things differently from the others, quickly and as often as alternatives, no matter how seemingly illogical, occurred to him, or he would surely die like them, and at the moment the only thing he could think of to do that the amateur and professional cavers and team of Army Rangers had certainly not done during their descent down the glacier wall was to turn off the powerful light mounted on his helmet, and the instant he did so he was enveloped in a darkness so complete and almost palpable, and he felt so alone, that it paradoxically reminded him of the shimmering light on the surface of the glacier he now embraced and the scene of spiritual and physical chaos that had greeted him when he had arrived at the site the day before, parked his rented snowmobile at the edge of a sort of improvised "lot" filled with other snowmobiles, dogsleds, cross-country skis, and snowshoes, then climbed up the polar white and emerald green face of the glacier on crude steps that had been cut into the ice.

At the top he put on his sunglasses and scanned the area, which was littered with garbage, portable toilets, multicolored pup tents, rough wooden

crosses mounted on tripods, scattered urine and feces stains, improvised lean-tos, three igloos, and even a large, prefabricated aluminum Quonset hut he presumed had been erected by the missing five-man team of Army Rangers that had disappeared a week before into the cave that so far had claimed seventeen lives.

After forty-five minutes of walking around the campsite, occasionally peering into sleeping bags, he had not found the boy, which disappointed and surprised him, but he did find Dylan Parker. The tall man with the full head of bushy white hair and piercing blue eyes swimming with madness was standing at the head of a knot of his followers staring, transfixed, at the entrance to the cave, a secret tens—perhaps hundreds—of thousands of years old finally revealed, millimeter by millimeter, by the eons-long whisper of a receding glacier. The opening in the stone—merely the top of an ice-blocked cave entrance estimated to be upwards of two hundred feet high—was perhaps two feet at its highest point, twenty-five yards long, as black as a stain of india ink splashed against the gray-brown rock of the mountain that erupted like a great god's tooth from the bluish-white

gum of the ice sheet that encased it.

As if sensing Brendan's presence, Dylan Parker suddenly wheeled around, and his eyes with their gaze that was slightly manic even when he was calm suddenly glittered with excitement. He threw back his head and shouted like a man in the throes of ecstasy, "Priest!"

"Hello, Dylan," Brendan said, and winced when the tall man threw his long arms around him and squeezed.

"Even *you* know it's true this time, don't you?" Parker shouted hoarsely in Brendan's ear. "It's why you've come to join us!"

"Take it easy, will you, Dylan?" Brendan said not unkindly, extricating himself from the cult leader's grip and stepping back. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm here on business."

Dylan Parker shook his head determinedly. "God's business. The fact that you're here is one more sign."

"I gave up the presumption of trying to know God's business ten years ago, Dylan. It's the same situation as when I met you the first time. I'm looking for another kid."

The big man in the silver and orange parka spread his arms in a gesture that seemed at

once benediction and supplication. "Why bother? In a very short time you'll be reunited with everyone you've ever loved or looked for, have everything you ever wanted or thought you wanted. We all will. We're going to heaven."

"His father doesn't want him going to heaven just yet, at least not without his medication. I was certain he'd be with you, and if he's not, I've wasted a lot of my time and his father's money. He's a nineteen-year-old boy by the name of Hector Martinez. Is he here, Dylan?"

"Yes," the other man said simply.

Brendan let out a deep breath he had not even been aware he was holding. The simple affirmation meant he had not traveled more than six thousand miles by jumbo jet, bush plane, dogsled, and snowmobile for nothing. "Thanks, Dylan. I appreciate it."

"What are you thanking me for, Priest?" Parker asked, a slight edge to his voice. "My telling you that Hector is here? You know I don't ask anyone to follow me against his will. People who are with me are free to come and go as they wish. I don't hide things, and I don't try to brainwash anybody."

"I'm aware of that, Dylan. Where is he?"

"In town getting supplies. He should be back in an hour or so."

"I hope he took a barrel of cash. The Indians in that native village are having a field day, thanks to you. It's costing me two hundred dollars a night to stay in a tool shed with a kerosene heater, and that snowmobile I rented must have been the last one in town because it's costing me three hundred and fifty dollars a day. The Indians should give you a cut, or at least make you an honorary tribal chieftain."

"I have my own money," Dylan Parker said stiffly. "It's given to me by my followers of their own free will, and it all flows back to them. You know that, Priest. If you thought I was a thief, I suspect your attitude toward me would not be quite so benign. I helped you find that girl; she wanted to go back with you to her family, and I didn't object in the least."

Brendan sighed, then nodded in the direction of the black gash in the mountainside at the edge of the glacier. "Just what is it you think is down there?"

"The end of the world. Jesus is coming."

"Out of the cave?"

"I'm not sure what's coming out of the cave. Perhaps Jesus—perhaps demons, or angels. It

doesn't matter. It's the end of the world as we know it, because Jesus is coming back to rule His kingdom."

Brendan grunted. "You thought it was the end of the world five years ago, Dylan. You and twenty-seven of your followers, including the girl I was hired to find, went to New Mexico and sat in the desert for a month, waiting, until your food and money ran out, and you all decided that your timetable had been a bit off. What makes you so certain you've read the schedule right this time?"

Dylan Parker pushed a long strand of white hair out of his eyes and back under the hood of his parka, then half turned and waved his right hand to indicate their surroundings. "Look around you, Priest. There are hundreds here, camped out in the cold. They're not here because I told them to come. They're here because of the discovery of the cave; they've been called to this desolate place by God to witness the beginning of our entrance into Paradise."

"They're here because they read or heard news reports about the cave and your prophecy, Dylan. The entrance to a cave that's been hidden since at least the last ice age suddenly appears and starts swallowing

up people, and then somebody with your charisma starts telling everybody it's a sign of the Second Coming. It's powerful imagery, and it appeals to a lot of people who are miserable with the present version of their lives. They want an easy way to start over, and they think a Second Coming will give it to them. Also, it's Millennium Fever. You're going to see a big increase in this kind of nonsense in the next few years."

Parker squinted. "You may call it nonsense, but the fact that you've come here, for whatever reason, is still a sign. It's what God wants."

"If you say so."

"Why did the Church excommunicate you, Priest?"

The abrupt change of subject, and the question itself, startled Brendan, and he was momentarily taken aback. "It's none of your business, Dylan," he replied at last, softly, and twenty-four hours later, suspended in darkness and listening to the faint but distinct scratching sounds of moving things on the stone of the cave floor far below him, he realized that what he was feeling was the same almost overpowering sense of mystery and awe he had once experienced when entering a church and thinking it was God's home. He was as sur-

prised at the intensity of the emotion as he was by his lack of fear. Although he had not yet even made it to the floor of the cave, and was surrounded by clicking and scratching sounds that could signal the presence of whatever it was that had killed the others, he was not sorry he had begun this journey into a place possibly millions of years old where humans had only recently come, and disappeared. He knew what he had told Philip Imukpak, and he knew what he had told himself, but now he wondered if the real reason he had started on this journey was to experience an emotion, a kind of ecstasy, he had thought lost to him forever, as well as a kind of faith as powerful as any he had ever felt.

He could traffic in crackpot ideas with the best of them, Brendan thought as he smiled grimly to himself in the darkness; he actually believed that he was not going to die in this cave.

He estimated it had been more than five minutes since he had turned off the lamp on his helmet, and the scratching sounds in the darkness below him had become even more pronounced. When he heard something climbing up the ice wall toward him, he locked off the bosun's chair on the line, then

took his automatic and a powerful flashlight out of the smaller pack strapped to his chest. He aimed the flashlight down into the darkness, flipped the switch.

"*Christ!*" Brendan cried out when he saw the black, leathery thing with long fangs and claws and no eyes clinging to the ice wall barely two feet below him.

He was about to fire the gun when the thing began to thrash wildly in the bright light, then lost its grip on the ridged ice. It emitted an extremely high pitched squealing sound as it plummeted to the stone floor below, where it exploded in a burst of blood, bone, and tissue that appeared black in the beam of light. When Brendan swept the beam across the floor, two other black leather creatures shuffled away into the darkness, their extended claws clicking and scratching on the stone.

The creatures looked like bats, Brendan thought—except that they were almost the size of a man and waddled like penguins rather than flew.

And they were obviously carnivorous; as he continued to sweep the beam of the powerful flashlight across the floor he could make out bloodstains, scattered bones with pieces of flesh still clinging to them, and

scraps of clothing. However, he did not see any army uniforms or equipment, and he did not see a green-checked flannel shirt or red cap.

This sealed-off, domed entrance to the cave system was the size of a massive cathedral, and tributary caves of various sizes radiated off from the stone wall in all directions, at varying heights, and Brendan knew that, even without the threat of the creatures in the darkness who viewed him as their latest entree, it was hopeless to even think of trying to explore all of them. *He* needed a sign—and he received it.

When he swept the beam of light across the curved wall to his left, his heart began to pound, not with fear but with hope. At the mouth of one of the larger tributary caves, placed on top of a pile of stones as if it had been left there intentionally, was a red baseball cap.

He knew he could descend to the bottom of the hall and climb up a slope of riprap to the cave, but the stone floor, with its pools of gore, did not look like a particularly safe place to be. Consequently he pushed off the ice wall at an angle, swung out, then extended his legs and pushed off even harder, in the opposite direction, when he came back to the wall. After fifteen minutes of considerable

exertion the arc of his swing carried him over the ledge that held the pile of stones and red cap. He released the safety mechanism on his rigging, dropping to the ledge. He immediately grabbed for the rope, but missed; the line swung away into the darkness, out of reach. It meant he would have to descend to the killing floor to climb back up, but Brendan decided that was the least of his worries at the moment. He picked up the cap, stepped into the mouth of the cave.

"Hector!" he shouted. "*Hector, can you hear me?*" He waited, listening, but heard nothing but the hollow echoes of his own voice, and then silence once more.

"Hello, Priest," Hector Martinez said evenly as he pulled his red supply-laden snowmobile into the area near the edge of the glacier where Brendan was waiting, cut the engine, and got off.

"You don't look surprised to see me, Hector."

The slight boy with the handsome face and hair and eyes as black as Brendan's merely shrugged. "My dad sent you, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to try to persuade me to go back?"

"If I did try, would I have any chance of success?"

"No."

"Then I won't try."

The boy looked up, fixed Brendan with his sad eyes. "It's almost time, you know. Jesus is coming out of the cave. I want to be here to meet Him."

"Fine. You're of legal age now, Hector. Nobody can make you do anything you don't want to do. If you want to sit around on a glacier and wait for Jesus to step out of a cave that's already killed seventeen people, that's your privilege. It's not like when you used to run away and spend time at the shelter."

Hector Martinez raised a brown hand to shield his eyes from the bright sunlight reflected off the ice and snow around them. "Then why are you here?"

"To deliver a message."

"What message?"

"Is there someplace we can go to sit down and talk, Hector? Maybe the Quonset hut? It looks like the state troopers have set up some kind of first aid station there."

"I want to get back to my friends, and I have these supplies to take to them. Why don't you just say whatever it is my father paid you to come all this way to say?"

Brendan studied the boy, felt anger and frustration rising in

him. "All right, Hector," he said abruptly. "Your mother's dead. She died in an automobile accident three weeks ago. Your father thought you should know."

Brendan waited for the boy's reaction. He was prepared to take Hector Martinez in his arms to comfort him, but the boy did not seem particularly shocked, or saddened. His eyes misted, and a single tear rolled down one cheek, but that was all. "It's all right," he said softly. "We'll be together again very soon."

"Come back with me, Hector. Your father would very much like you home with him. He loves you. Nothing is going to happen here, except that you're going to get older, wetter, dirtier, and more miserable."

The boy slowly, firmly, shook his head. "The world is going to end. Jesus is coming. I have to be here to meet Him."

"I've brought you something."

"What?"

Brendan took the dark orange plastic prescription bottle out of one of his pockets in his parka, offered it to the boy. "Your lithium."

Hector Martinez looked at the bottle in Brendan's outstretched hand, took a step backward. "You know I won't take that stuff, Priest. God

doesn't want me to poison my body with drugs. The doctors couldn't get me to take it before, and I won't take it now."

"This isn't for your body, Hector, and you know it. It's for your mind. You're a severe manic-depressive, and God put a lot of you on this earth. Fortunately, God also made lithium. It's not poison; it won't alter your thoughts, and it won't do your thinking for you. What it will do is give you a level emotional playing field to stand on. It will help you to think straight, and you'll feel better. You'll know you don't really want to be here. You'll understand that you're squandering your place in the world, your life, by sitting around and waiting for it all to end. People who think the world is going to end and that Jesus is coming back really want to end their own lives because they're unhappy; they want God to end it all for them, painlessly, and then give them a brand new off-the-shelf life that Jesus won't allow them to foul up. I'd have more sympathy for them if they weren't so eager for God to take everyone else's life, too. Take the medicine, Hector. Go back home to mourn with your father, and stop all this stupid screwing around. You've wasted enough of your life because you wouldn't do what your doc-

tors recommended, and your life isn't going to end now just because you want it to."

The boy stiffened. "Just because you don't have faith, Priest, is no reason why I shouldn't. Jesus *is* coming soon, and I'm going to be here to meet Him."

"Goodbye, Hector," Brendan said quietly to Hector Martinez as the boy snatched a box off the snowmobile, then turned and started up the steps carved in the ice, and Brendan was still haunted by the conversation as he walked through the intricate labyrinth of caverns, leaving chalked blaze marks on the walls, calling the boy's name, and at the same time experiencing an ever-increasing sense of awe as he passed running streams and coursing rivers, night meadows of strange, dark plants, some as tall as trees, none of which had ever been exposed to a single ray of sunlight. He found the corpse of one of the black, leathery creatures that had apparently died of natural causes, examined it and knew what it was, which he could not say about the myriad other creatures that appeared in increasing abundance as he traveled ever deeper into the mountain, ever closer to the unsuspected heat source three miles to the north that gave life to this world and

had sustained the Givers, whose artifacts were strewn all over the caverns. But he had not found the boy, and even in his rapt awe and astonishment he remained haunted by their last conversation, as he had been haunted the night before as he'd lain awake in the tool shed, staring at the glow of his kerosene heater and knowing that in the morning he would cancel his reservation with the bush pilot and return to the glacier and the ages-old secret it had only recently begun to reveal.

"You don't look like the type."

Brendan turned from the cave opening, found himself looking into the handsome, brown face of an Eskimo, one of the state troopers who occasionally stopped by and stayed for a day or two in the Quonset hut, which they had made their headquarters. "What type is that?"

"An end-of-the-worlder."

"What does an end-of-the-worlder look like?"

The trooper casually swept his arm around to indicate the others scattered over the ice, Dylan Parker and his followers. "Like those people."

Brendan grunted. "I'm surprised you haven't sealed off the cave entrance, or at least

posted a guard to make sure nobody else goes down there."

The Eskimo shrugged. "This is Alaska. Here, we let people do pretty much as they please."

"Even if it pleases them to kill themselves?"

"Alaska has a high suicide rate; I suspect a lot of people come here to kill themselves, although they may not realize it. We come around to keep an eye on things, but if anybody is stupid enough to go down there after seventeen people, including expert cavers and a team of Army Rangers, have disappeared, it's their problem."

"Sometimes people have to be protected from themselves."

"Not in Alaska; Alaskans don't like to be protected from themselves, which is one reason they come to, or stay in, Alaska. Besides, these people won't be here much longer. If they think it's cold up here now, wait another month. Our summers don't last long."

"When winter comes, do you think the glacier will seal off the cave again?"

"No. It's been slowly receding for the past seventy-five years. In another thousand years or so, the entire entrance will probably be exposed."

"What happens with the cave now?"

"This is federal land, so it's the Feds' call, but the last I

heard NASA is sending a team of scientists here. They're going to try to modify one of their robot explorers, then lower it down there to have a look-around with a TV camera. I wish them lots of luck. We've got seismic readings showing there are hundreds of miles of caves honeycombing not only that mountain, but the two on either side of it as well, and they're all interconnected. The system may be bigger than Carlsbad Caverns and Mammoth Caves combined. We may never know what killed those people. The Rangers went down there loaded for bear, with everything from gas masks and oxygen tanks to machine guns; the problem is that whatever it is down there killing people isn't a bear." The trooper paused, looked hard at Brendan. "You're Brendan Furie, aren't you? The man they call Priest."

"I'm not a priest," Brendan replied, making no effort to mask his surprise.

"But you used to be. You were excommunicated for some reason. I'll bet the Church fathers are sorry about that now."

"Somehow, I doubt it. How do you know who I am?"

"You're very modest, Furie. There's been a lot written

about you. You work now as a private investigator."

"I investigate sometimes, privately, but I'm not a private investigator in the usual sense. I do a lot of work for social agencies, private, state, and federal."

"Mostly with troubled children."

"Sometimes with troubled children, but there are a lot of troubled adults, too. The things that people believe sometimes get them into a lot of trouble, and I'm occasionally hired to get them out of it."

"I'm Philip Imukpak," the Eskimo said, removing a glove and extending his hand. "I'm pleased to meet you, Furie. You do good work."

"Not always," Brendan said quietly as he shook the trooper's hand, then glanced back at the black gash between ice and rock.

"I take it you're here looking for somebody. You need help?"

"No. I found who I was looking for yesterday—a nineteen-year-old boy by the name of Hector Martinez." He paused, swallowed hard. "He stole some equipment, tied a rope onto one of the pitons left in the rock, and went into the cave last night."

"Oh, Jesus," the trooper said softly. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah. It's my fault."

"That sounds like a pretty heavy load to put on yourself, Furie."

"But it's a true load. We had a conversation yesterday, and it went badly. I botched it."

"It still sounds like a pretty heavy load to put on yourself."

Brendan took his gaze from the cave entrance and looked into the other man's face. What he saw there was decency, honesty, and courage. He liked and trusted the face with its soulful brown eyes; it was a face to which he could confess, and so he said, "Hector's a diagnosed manic-depressive, severely emotionally disturbed. I've known him for years, from a shelter for runaway children where I serve as a counselor. He always resisted taking the medication that would help him, and so he would suffer psychotic episodes and have fantasies that only reinforced his decision not to take his medication. Three weeks ago his mother died, and his father hired me to try to find him, give him the bad news, and then once again try to get him to come home and get the proper treatment. One of his strongest fantasies has always been that the world was going to end any day, and that he would get to meet Jesus. When I read about this cave, and heard that Dylan Parker was here on another

one of his end-of-the-world vigils, I had a pretty good idea I'd find Hector here. I was right. I gave him the bad news, but I didn't get him to go home. I was tired, and I got impatient. I should have handled it differently."

"It sounds to me like he might have gone down into the cave anyway."

"No. He was willing to wait for Jesus to come out. He's gone down there to meet his dead mother. It's why I have to go down after him."

The trooper was silent for some time, studying Brendan's face. Finally he said carefully, "You want to die because you think you made a mistake?"

"I don't want to die; I don't plan to die."

"That sounds like a belief that could get you into a lot of trouble."

"It's something I have to do," Brendan said quietly.

Again, the Eskimo was silent for some time as he stared into Brendan's midnight eyes. Finally he nodded, said, "Yes. I can see that. When do you plan to go?"

"Now."

"Have you ever done any rock climbing or caving?"

"No."

"Do you have any equipment?"

"The rope Hector used is still attached to the piton. I was hoping to borrow or buy whatever else I might need from the other people around here."

"Come with me, Furie."

Brendan followed Philip Imukpak across the width of the glacier, past pup tents and sleeping bags and lean-tos and the blank-faced people who occupied them, to the Quonset hut. The layout inside the metal dome was simple, with wooden slats for floorboards, three kerosene heaters strategically placed at intervals around the perimeter, three cots draped with thick down sleeping bags, an electric generator, and a butane cooking stove on which a pot of coffee simmered. In one corner was a mound of dun-colored equipment—canvas bags, ropes, chain, battery powered lanterns and flashlights, automatic weapons.

"This is extra equipment the Rangers left behind," the trooper continued. "I'll show you how to use it. I don't think you'll want to lug everything. The Rangers went down loaded to the ears and armed to the teeth, and it doesn't seem to have done them much good. I suggest you travel light in order to conserve energy."

"Agreed," Brendan said, and watched as Philip Imukpak be-

gan to remove various pieces of climbing equipment from the bags and spread them out over the makeshift floor. He was struck again by how much he instinctively liked and trusted this man, who was willing to offer so much help and ask so few questions. He continued, "I told you I didn't handle this business with Hector well. I made a similar mistake once before. I bungled an exorcism."

The trooper stopped what he was doing, glanced up at Brendan. He was too polite to laugh, but curiosity mixed with amusement was clearly reflected in his dark brown eyes. "You bungled an *exorcism*?"

Brendan smiled thinly. "In a manner of speaking, yes. I agree it sounds funny; it would be funny if a woman hadn't died as a result of things I did—and didn't do. It's why I was excommunicated."

The laughter left the other man's eyes. "I'm sorry."

Brendan nodded curtly. "The lesson is that you shouldn't do things you don't believe in."

"Did you believe then?"

"No; not in demonic possession—and so I didn't believe in exorcism."

"Then why did you do it?"

"I was ordered to. I should have refused, but I didn't. It was Church politics. The girl I was supposed to exorcise was

the daughter of a very wealthy and powerful man. She was another runaway, staying at the shelter where I counsel. The father gave a great deal of money to the Church, and played golf every week with the cardinal of our archdiocese. The girl's story was that she was being repeatedly raped by her father's closest business associate, who also happened to be her mother's lover. The father just couldn't accept this; it was impossible for him to accept that all of this could be happening right under his nose, and so he decided that his daughter must be possessed in order to make up such a story. He asked his friend the cardinal to arrange for an exorcism. The cardinal was no fool; he knew he could never get Rome to approve the procedure and send one of their trained exorcists based on the evidence that was presented, and so he pressured me into doing it—simply to mollify the father. I investigated, determined that the girl was telling the truth, and I went to the mother to offer her my help in straightening out the mess. Big mistake. I didn't handle that conversation any better than I handled the one with Hector. The mother ended up killing herself rather than face what she thought would be

the shame and humiliation of having the truth come out."

Philip Imukpak made a sound that was somewhere between a sigh and a hum. "Rome needed someone to blame, and you were it."

"Something like that. They weren't wrong. The point is that if that woman had disappeared into a cave instead of jumping off the roof of their mansion, I'd have gone after her, too."

"You got the short end of the stick."

"On the contrary. Now I consider my excommunication a great gift. It changed my life for the better, and I'm grateful I've had the opportunity to do some of the things I've done—except for times like yesterday. If Hector is dead, at least maybe I'll be able to recover his body and take it back to his father."

The trooper simply nodded, then went about instructing Brendan in the use of the bosun's chair and other equipment laid out on the floor. When he had finished, he helped Brendan put on back and chest packs, and the rigging he would use to lower himself to the cave floor. Brendan gripped the other man's shoulders and nodded, then headed for the door.

"You want company?"

Surprised as much by the trooper's casual tone as by the question itself, Brendan paused in the doorway of the Quonset hut, turned back. The Eskimo had picked up a pack and coil of rope, and was looking at Brendan inquiringly.

"What?"

"Do you want me to go with you?"

"I don't understand. You're convinced I'm going to die. Why should you be willing to die with me?"

"I'm not convinced you're going to die. And you are a man I would go into those caves with, Priest."

Brendan was silent for some time, staring at the other man. Finally he said, "That's the finest compliment I've ever received, Philip. Thank you."

Imukpak grinned, revealing bright, even white teeth. "Of course, I'm also curious."

Brendan grinned back. "Well, that's understandable."

"My curiosity is a bit more involved than you may think. We Inuit have a very curious Creation myth. It concerns a species of godlike creatures we call the Givers. Actually, the Givers were somewhat flawed gods—not very pleasant to be around. They rounded us up, used us as beasts of burden, and even ate us. The Givers had already lived for millions

of years before the Inuit came into being, building a great city inside mountains that were near a volcano—a kind of underground Garden of Eden, if you will. They survived through many ice ages inside those mountains. But then the volcano died, and the Givers died with it when the ice and snow came again. But we didn't die. The Inuit could live in the cold, using the things we had learned from the Givers to survive right up to the present day."

Brendan turned around, gazed across the ice sheet toward the rock face and the entrance to the cave. "That mountain's an extinct volcano?"

"Not that one. But the one behind it is. Interesting, no?"

Brendan turned back. "Your reason doesn't sound as good as mine."

Imukpak thought about it, then shrugged and dropped the pack and coil of rope to the floor. "You're probably right. Good luck, Priest."

"I'll let you know what I find," Brendan said, and thought now as he walked in the direction of the boy's answering shouts that Philip Imukpak, and not a few other people, would be more than a little interested in what was in the caves.

*

He found Hector Martinez in what could only be described as a chapel, sitting on a stone bench. Strewn about him were dead batteries. The faint glow from his flashlight was just barely enough to illuminate the mummified remains of what could only be a Giver priest slumped over the raised stone rectangle of what could only be an altar. Brendan went to the boy, and they embraced. Then Brendan set out four flares, which were sufficient to light the entire chamber. He turned off his lantern, sat down next to the boy, and put his arm around him. "I'm so sorry about your mother, Hector."

Tears sprang to the boy's eyes, rolled down his cheeks. "Yeah. Me too. I'm really happy to see you, Priest."

"And I'm really happy to see you." Brendan paused, smiled at the boy, added carefully, "From the looks of all the extra batteries you brought with you, I'd say you weren't all that certain you wanted to die just yet. Also, you left your cap to show which cave you'd gone into. Am I right in assuming that you might want to live a little bit longer—or at least not die down here?"

Hector Martinez slowly nodded his head. He seemed transfixed by the figure on the altar,

and by the myriad of paintings and stone sculptures illuminated by the flares. "What were those . . . things . . . that came after me?"

"If you're referring to those big, black, ugly critters back by the entrance, my guess is that they're mutated bats—carnivores. They're a hell of a lot bigger than any of the other animals I've seen down here, so they must be at the top of the food chain. That means there aren't too many of them, and they're probably normally scattered all over the place. When people started coming down here, it was like the call went out, 'Look what's coming for dinner,' and they started congregating around the entrance to wait for their next meal to drop in. It's possible you and I got through because they're pretty full right now, and not as aggressive—or hungry, or as numerous—as they were when the others went down. In any case, they can be handled if we keep our eyes and ears open. They're blind, but they must have residual photoreceptors in their skulls because they don't like it when you shine a bright light on their heads. If all else fails, I have a gun and lots of ammunition with me."

The boy slowly looked around him, then again fastened his gaze on the mummified

priest, shuddered. "It's horrible."

"Horrible? I think this is a pretty cool place."

The boy looked at Brendan, laughed nervously. "That's only because you're pretty cool."

"Hector," Brendan said seriously, "these caves are a place of wondrous mystery, and what's to be found here will change the world forever."

"How could it be, Priest? How could this . . . *place* be?"

"At the bottom of the ocean there are animals, giant tube-worms and blind crabs, that thrive in very small areas around volcanic vents erupting from the ocean floor. They live solely on the warmth and nutrients that spew out of the vents, without benefit of sunlight or any other food. There's also an ancient rock structure, called the Burgess Shale, where there are the fossil remains of millions and millions of tiny, wondrous creatures that all lived, evolved, and finally became extinct, all in an area of a few square miles at most. These species existed over millions of years in this one area, and no trace of them has ever been found anywhere else. Now think of what you have down here; it's the Burgess Shale phenomenon magnified thousands of times, and it's

still alive. You have a living ecosystem, an entire world, that has evolved over millions of years and is still evolving, in the total absence of photosynthesis. *That*, my friend, is truly remarkable—miraculous, if you will. My guess is that the energy source for the system comes from a volcano near here that isn't as dead as the people on the top floors think. It supplies warmth and nutrients for the creatures and plants at the bottom of the food chain, which in turn are eaten by the bigger guys. There are chemical processes down here we've never seen before in nature. There will be new medicines, maybe a cure for cancer—or even the common cold—derived from the vegetation that grows here."

The boy raised a hand that trembled slightly, pointed at the dead priest on the altar. "What about that? What about *them*?"

"What about *them*?"

"They used us like animals."

"First of all, Hector, don't jump to conclusions about what you've seen down here. These caves are millions of years old, and the creatures that are going about their business now are only the latest inhabitants. There have probably been all sorts of species, including Neanderthals, Cro-Magnon, and early humans, who have called

these caves home at one time or another, but they didn't all live here at the same time. Then the last ice age, or even the one before it, came. The glacier sealed off the cave entrance, and the things that are here now began to evolve."

"But those things and humans lived at the same time. You saw the paintings and the carvings in the rock. They kept us. They . . . ate us."

"So what? So do lions, tigers, and sharks."

"It's different."

"No, it's not. We eat other animals, like whales and porpoise, that, in their own way, may be as intelligent as we are—or close to it."

"But how could *they* have existed, and accomplished what they did, without our finding out about them before now?"

"Remember the lesson of the Burgess Shale, Hector."

"These things had language, art, and writing. They kept us as *slaves*. How could they only have existed here? They walked on two legs, and they were *smart*."

"Ah, but they were also cold-blooded—at least the guy laid out on the stone over there looks pretty coldblooded to me. They couldn't survive—or at least couldn't function effectively for any extended period of time—away from the

warmth that was radiated throughout those caves by the volcano. That, or they may have lacked one ingredient of consciousness that led our species to scatter ourselves all over the world: human curiosity. These caves were the entire world, and they simply may not have *cared* what went on beyond it. There's no other trace of them to be found anywhere else over the tens of thousands, or even millions, of years of their existence, because they never *went* anywhere else. They were the ultimate home-bodies, Hector."

The boy was silent for some time, then asked, "What do you suppose happened to the Army Rangers?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. We may never know—or they may pop out of these caves next week, or even be waiting for us right now up above. They went a different way, and we don't know what they found, or what found them. This is truly a different world, and there are probably hundreds of ways to die down here that we can't even imagine—it's no different from what could happen to some Amazon pygmy suddenly dropped into Times Square. What would he or she know about cars and trucks, or muggers, or Saturday Night Specials, or traffic lights?"

Hector Martinez looked into the face of the tall, powerfully built man sitting beside him. "None of this bothers you, does it?"

"What's to bother me? I'm alive; even more important, I found you alive. Now, *there's* a sign."

"How could God have created Man in His image, and then created *those* . . . things to do all of the things we did, and eat us besides?"

"Let me tell you a little personal secret, Hector. I've always considered it a rather curious conceit for a species as brutal and cruel, insensitive, and occasionally downright stupid as humans to presume that God would create *them*, of all things, in His image. If that were true, then we'd *really* be in trouble."

"Then why did you become a priest in the first place?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time. Then I needed to express what I'm not content merely to continue to feel—a sense of awe, of breathlessness at the world, and the gift to me of my presence in it. The basic lesson of all of humankind's sacred texts is that humans invariably create all of our gods at least with our mindsets and prejudices, if not always in our image. They don't glorify God, they diminish Him. God can

only be an infinitely wondrous, and ultimately unknowable, mystery—like these caves.”

“Jesus looked like us; He was one of us. You don’t believe Jesus could have been God’s Son?”

“Look, Hector, I’m not going to tell you any more about what I do or don’t believe when it comes to faith in the supernatural. It’s irrelevant, and it wouldn’t do you any good. What I believe has changed before, and it will probably change again—evolving under the pressure of sunlight, rain, wind, love, hate, fear, observation, and reason. So I’m not going to tell you what to believe. But I am going to caution you to be *careful* what you choose to believe, because you become what you believe. What’s important is that you realize what’s being offered to you now, perhaps by God, at this moment. These caves are a tomb for a species that came before us, enslaved us when we came on the scene, and probably taught us a great deal. Let this place also be a tomb for your past life, for the beliefs and behavior that initially brought you down here to die. There’s an awesome amount of work to be done down here, and generations of scientists are going to spend lifetimes doing it, poking around and discovering

the secrets of this place. Whole new sciences are going to be born. Be a part of it.”

“I don’t have any training.”

“Get some. In four years, or however long it takes you to get an appropriate degree and training, they’ll barely have scratched the surface of this world. People will *want* you to be a part of it. You have a franchise: a kind of spiritual survivor to religious people all over the world, of whatever faith—because I assure you there are going to be lots of folks who are going to be extremely upset by what’s been discovered down here. You can assure them that it’s not—if you’ll pardon the expression—the end of the world. You’ll be able to afford to do anything you want. There’ll be book and movie offers, and it wouldn’t surprise me to hear that some William Morris agent tries to book a dogsled team minutes after word of our return gets out. You’re going to be a very wealthy young man.”

“What about you, Priest?”

“I make all the money I need doing what I like to do. I don’t need the distraction. It’s your opportunities we’re talking about. You were waiting for a Second Coming, Hector; let it be yours. Be something different when you leave here.”

The boy looked at Brendan, his dark eyes now filled with hope—but also fear. “But how do we get out? How can we get past those bats, or whatever they are?”

“No problem.”

“No problem?”

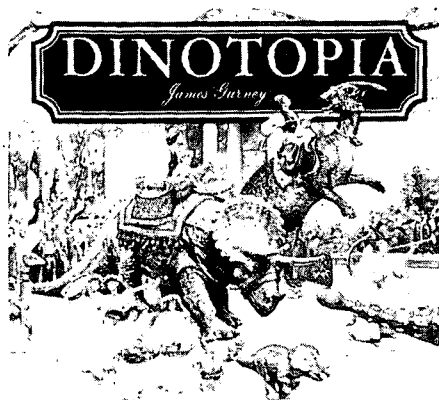
“They may be a lot bigger, blinder, and meaner than your average bat, but they still must function with sonar capabilities. We’re going to scramble their screens, jam their radar. First, we’re going to load our packs with your dead batteries and lots of stones. Then we’re going to be *very* cautious walking back. When we get to the big dome at the cave entrance, I’m going to stay up on the ledge and throw batteries and stones all around to distract them while you climb down,

scamper across the floor to the rope, and climb out. When you get to the top, you’ll return the favor. Then, when we’re out of here, you and I and a certain Alaska state trooper who’s waiting for me are going to that native village and probably spend half of your movie money for a good hot meal. Simple. You ready?”

Hector Martinez threw back his head and laughed loudly—but there was no hysteria in the echoing sound, only excitement and joy. Finally he stopped, slowly shook his head, and put out his hand. “I hope you brought my lithium with you, Priest. I’m going to be needing a little emotional pick-me-up if I see one of those black things lumbering after me, so I may as well start taking it right now.”

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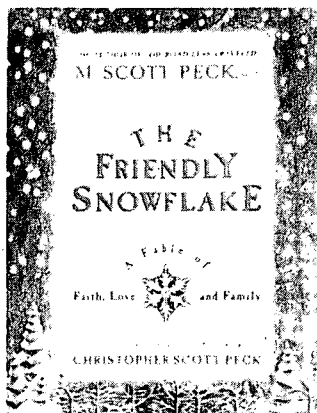


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FICTION

Praise the Sea

by Dan Crawford



Illustration by Pat Olstad

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Polijn couldn't get over the sun. The riverfront back home never saw this much light, between the haze that always rose from the water and the shade of the buildings that rotted at river's edge. A few docks that weren't sinking into the mud sometimes showed a little action, but just the kind that found shadows most congenial. Legal traffic on the river was sporadic; Rossacottan towns were too far apart to make river transport profitable.

But this was not Malbeth in Rossacotta; this was Felliew, one of the biggest ports on the Silmarién side of the Great Gulf. Men wearing little more than white caps and short pants were busy along every foot of the wooden peninsula, men putting things onto ships, men taking things off of ships. She set a hand above her eyes and looked for the black ship with ten red birds on the bow. The captain of the *Ten Firebirds*, she'd been told, was always willing to ferry a passenger across the gulf without asking any questions beyond "where's my money?"

When she spotted it, she knew at once which of the seven men working there was the captain. He wore a hat instead of a cap, and a vest. There was also a white mustache that attested to his seniority. Otherwise, he was as thin and weathered as his crew, a tall, narrow man like one of the planks in the dock.

Darting black eyes sized her up as she approached, a stranger all in black. What he thought of her she couldn't tell. She thought he was someone who would bear watching. But she liked that thought better than the thought of what was behind her.

"I need to go across," she told him, without preliminaries. "I am . . ."

"Ponteri's teeth!" The mustache puffed out when he spoke. "Going across? You can pay? I need no more, my lady. Step aboard!"

That much of her information was true, at least. Polijn stepped nimbly along the plank set from dockside to the gunwale of the shallow, high-riding ship. A small mound of cargo sat in the center of the deck, with a group of passengers crouched beside. Six pairs of eyes came up as she approached; suspicion showed in all of them.

They made no room for Polijn but didn't chase her away, either. They obviously had more important concerns. The three men were keeping their eyes on the shore, waiting for someone they hoped not to see.

"I shall be sick," said a fat woman to the two girls—servants or daughters—who sat at her feet. "I know I shall be sick."

"Aye," said a little man with a big head who wore livery with the coat of arms torn off. "You know how they say it in Dolov; praise the sea but stay on land."

"Have you tried honey with saffron sprinkled on it?" asked an older man with a white beard he kept fingering.

"Honey with cinnamon," corrected a very tall man with a grey beard that was obviously phony.

The older man frowned. "Saffron," he said.

"I have always heard that you must put mustard seeds between your toes," said the fat woman. "But who has any mustard seeds when she needs them? By the time your head is turning, who has time to look for mustard seeds?"

"It gets me in the stomach first," said the man in the damaged livery.

Polijn thought of striking up a song to distract them as they started to swap cures and symptoms. She saw, though, that they were actually as cheerful as they could expect to be, arguing who was sickest at sea, and whose traditional cure, paradoxically, was the most to be relied upon to prevent any sickness at all. Polijn's mouth jerked up on one side. A good minstrel ought to know when to keep quiet, too.

Instead, she moved around the lump of cargo to the stern and studied the murky water beyond it. Polijn was herself no great lover of the sea. She was not inclined to seasickness, so far as she knew, but swimming was not her most dependable talent. And she had a Rossacottan's fear of places from which there was only one possible exit.

She owed her presence on this refugee ship to the too hasty singing of a song with the wrong genealogy. Being a bit behind on the news in this part of Silmarién, she was unaware that there was a new duke in Byalte, and that his legitimacy depended on a slight change of wording in the third verse of "The Ride to Arin's Town." She had thought herself free of pursuit once past the thirty-fourth milestone, but again her lack of current news betrayed her. The Count of Nutrude was the duke's younger brother. Polijn had reached the port of Felliew just one hour ahead of them.

Felliew was not part of Nutrude, nor of any other noble's territory. By ancient custom, it was an independent city state ruled by its council. Its law demanded that the troops of neighboring nobles could not enter the city before expiration of an eight hour waiting period. This naturally allowed a number of fugitives to escape but

was tolerated because Felliew also controlled imports for six large territories. The city government could find ways to hang onto the worst offenders until the waiting period was up. One of the criteria for identifying the worst offenders was whether they or the pursuers could pay more.

So Polijn estimated she had seven hours to put out across the gulf if the commander of the troops following her was chintzy, and perhaps half an hour if he proved to be open-pocketed. There was no time to shop around for a more comfortable ship than the *Ten Firebirds*. She had expected something larger, more crowded. The trip across the gulf took a good eight hours; the captain couldn't make much off so few passengers. But perhaps he made it back on the cargo, which could be landed somewhere where tariffs were not collected.

"Time to shove off!" called the captain, not a second too soon for the passengers. The ship gave out many a creak and groan as it was pushed off from the dock and the sail raised. This was accompanied by many a glance back to the shore as each passenger watched for a personal bogey who might appear at the last moment to cancel an escape.

The captain wasted no time on the place he was leaving. Striding up to the stack of cargo, he bellowed, "Now, by Ponteri's teeth, you're all of you safe! There's no ship on the water can catch the *Ten Firebirds*!"

He was cheered, and his passengers struck up a little song in his honor. This attitude didn't last much longer than it took to get out of sight of land. The fat woman got sick, as she'd predicted. One of her companions administered a bottle of what she announced was diluted cat's blood and sulfur. It looked like plain wine from where Polijn was leaning.

The man with the fake beard left the merrily miserable group and came up to stand next to Polijn, folding his arms on the rail as he stared back where Felliew had been on the horizon. Polijn didn't move. No sense pulling away: she could hardly choose her company on such a small boat for such a long trip. At the moment he seemed more melancholy than predatory. A rather long sword hung at his hip, a silver-hilted weapon in a plain black scabbard. It was obviously very old, and of value beyond that of the far gaudier weapons the other men carried. Whether it was stolen or had some other story behind it Polijn felt she would find out. He looked like the type of man who shared his miseries.

He watched the water for a while. Polijn watched it, too. She didn't like the looks of it.

Finally he said, without looking up, "Anyone after you?"

Polijn didn't look up, either. "There are some few who would be glad to see me again, including the public executioner."

He shifted his arms, and Polijn didn't like the new position of the one nearest to the sword. She thought it might be best to add, "But I don't believe there's a reward."

"Reward?"

"No," said Polijn, shaking her head. "It all happened so quickly that they never had time to decree a reward."

He set one arm flat on the rail and turned to face her. "You mean they give money for the arrest of . . . of . . ." Politeness tied his tongue.

"Of criminals?" Polijn asked, raising her face toward his. "Yes, they do."

"Hmmm." He turned back toward the water. It was obviously a completely new concept to him. Polijn did not turn back to the water but gave her companion a rather closer study. His hair was black under the hat, and his beard was gray (though the string that held it on was black.) What she could see of his eyes was small black dots surrounded by masses of wrinkles. None of them looked like laugh lines, a feature Polijn always watched for.

Someone so ignorant of the facts of life had to be a member of a noble or even a royal family. He might well be a younger son fleeing attempts to secure the dynasty by eliminating distracting relatives. This could be his first time out of his household circle, and he was no doubt startled to find himself associating with outlaws.

Neither spoke for a few minutes. Then the man said, "So. What did you do that the . . . the public executioner should want to see you?"

Polijn shrugged. "Failure to show proper respect. It's probably just a matter of whipping post and pillory. Not much fee for him in that."

The man shook his head. "Actually, they get paid by the occasion, not the degree of punishment. Of course, there are larger tips from the victims in capital offenses, and souvenirs to be sold after."

"Ah!" said Polijn, understanding.

"Oh," said the man. His shoulders hunched up toward his ears, and he took an even closer interest in the water for several min-

utes. When he looked up, his head rocked back as he saw Polijn still standing there.

"I am the public executioner, you know," he said. "Or was."

She nodded. "I guessed."

Now he slid a little way down the rail, away from her. "There's no glamor to it, you know."

"I've met executioners before," she assured him.

He moved back, not quite as close to her as he had been, though. "Some women think . . . well . . ." He shrugged.

"How'd you lose your job?" Polijn asked.

"Lose?" He tossed his hands up. "I haven't lost it, I'm trying to lose it now. I'm running away from it."

"Running away?"

He shook his head and turned back to a study of the water. "My mother and uncles will be after me. They don't understand how I can run away from a steady income."

Polijn didn't understand it, either. But now that she was really looking at his face, he did seem very young, wrinkles to the contrary.

"It's hereditary," he explained. "We've been the public executioners in this part of Silmarién for four hundred years. We children were all given little swords to play with as soon as we could lift them. Since I was the oldest, I was trained to the sword for years. I'm good with it. I really am." He put a hand to his hilt but let it slip down to the scabbard.

"But Father never told me what it was he did. We never went to the executions. He went out, he came back." The man raised his hands. "I thought he was a soldier, an officer, away on short campaigns. He died about five years ago, and I was told to take his place."

Polijn nodded. "And you found out what that place was."

One hand dropped to the silver hilt again. "If I'm bad at it, I'm a disgrace to my training and family tradition. If I'm good, I have to swing my sword down on people who are bound and can't resist. The ones who haunt me aren't the ones I kill: that's quick. But to swing with a flourish and strike off a man's hand, or a woman's ear . . . I didn't train all those years for that. I have to stand and watch them kick and shake and scream, without any chance to kill them decently."

He shook his head and stared at the horizon. "While as for sitting in the official chair and directing the assistants as they flog some-

one who didn't show 'proper respect' . . . Well, it's no life for me. I tried it for five years, and now my family tradition can go on without me."

"What are you going to do now?"

He turned around, setting his back against the rail. "I thought about something like this. I always liked the sea, and maybe they can use a good sword, in case of pirates."

"If you're on a ferry," Polijn pointed out, "you'd always be coming back to Felliew, where your family could find you."

"They won't know me in disguise," he said with touching faith.

"Better not choose this one, though," she told him. She nodded toward the cargo. "I have a feeling this crew is going to wind up on the gallows, and you'd be right back where you started."

He rubbed his chin. "There's that. I know half a dozen cases like it."

The executioner, who eventually mentioned that his name was Ponsan, had of necessity followed a large number of court cases over the past five years. He was able to add, perhaps a bit late, to Polijn's store of recent history. Polijn, for her part, told him what she knew from songs about Gilraën, the land on the other side of the gulf. She had never herself been there; the great minstrels were trained there, and that would be mighty competition.

The swapping of stories finally led to a pact to accompany each other into Gilraën until one or the other got a better offer. The partnership ran into snarls almost at once, though. Ponsan argued for a route up the western coast. He had never intended to become bodyguard and subordinate jester, and traveling near the sea would offer plenty of opportunities to hunt for more congenial occupation. Polijn preferred a drier trek, moving to the east.

"There's always the east coast," she reminded him. "Where there's less chance of your uncles finding you."

"I told you," he said. "They don't have a chance of recognizing me."

Despite her concentration on convincing him that he wasn't so thoroughly safe, Polijn had been keeping an eye on what else was going on around her. In Rossacotta, you kept your back to the wall, and every few minutes you checked the wall to make sure it wasn't doing anything dangerous. Polijn trusted no one, and her lack of faith had kept her alive this far.

So she gestured her partner to silence when the crew members passed, talking in what passed for whispers on the water.

"Me for the two little ones," said the square man with the shaved head.

"What do you need two for?" demanded his companion, who was swinging a short wooden club in one hand. "If you're that greedy, you can have the big porkfatty. She'd do for three."

"Nah. T'skipper wants to toss her over and see if she floats."

Polijn and Ponsan exchanged glances, and rose slowly from where they'd been sitting. They were allowed to do this, but two more crew members were lounging not far away, their eyes on Ponsan's sword.

The captain, meanwhile, had strolled to the cargo section of the deck and had set a foot up on the nearest box. "Here we be, friends!" he called out. "Here's the halfway point in the Great Gulf. You'd have an even chance right now of swimming to either coast."

Some of the passengers were too miserable to respond, but one or two roused themselves sufficiently to laugh feebly at this feeble joke.

"So we're going to give you the chance!"

All seasickness stopped. The captain set both feet on the deck and both fists on his hips. "Now, I'm a sporting man who'll give you an extra chance as well. Every one of you who'll strip to the buff and hand over your goods without a fuss, I'll tell the lads not to clout you on the head before you go over. Step up now: the gentlemen first, by way of a change. The ladies will follow in just a bit."

Most of the passengers just stared, not sure yet whether the man was serious. The little fellow in livery, however, was taking no chances. He lunged from a seated position, aiming his head at the knees of the nearest crewman. The sailor simply sidestepped him, caught at his collar, and forced his face into a heavy barrel. Taking hold of the man next by his belt, the crewman shook him out of his pants, spattering the deck with blood from the little man's nose.

The fat woman fainted as her two companions screamed, one because the woman had fallen on her. Ponsan's sword was out, a long grey blade. The two sailors who had been watching over him stepped apart from each other, moving in slowly from opposing directions.

Polijn reached inside her tunic and drew out a disc of gold hanging on the chain at her neck. The symbol on the disc had impressed a number of people, though she had no idea what it meant. She also had no clear idea quite what she was going to do with it.

Would it be easier to hand it over and swim a few hundred miles, or claim mighty powers and start giving orders?

Ponsan was holding off the two sailors, who didn't seem to be trying very hard to cut him. Polijn looked left and right and spotted the third man, with a club. She put her free hand to the knife at her belt and started forward.

The man saw her coming and swung down. Polijn ducked under the blow, but was only just quick enough to dodge the kick that came at her almost simultaneously. She pulled away, looking the crewman over with new respect. He was going to fight the way they did back home.

She had to duck again almost immediately as Ponsan's blade came back for a furious blow. And this time she wasn't quick enough on the second dodge. The club spun her around just as the ship tipped hard to port. She felt a crack on the head, and then she felt water.

Huh! she thought, sinking peacefully with the amulet still in one hand and the knife in the other. Forgot to loot me.

The water was a lot colder than she'd have thought. Her head cleared quickly, and she started to kick. Neither of these things seemed to make much difference. She couldn't seem to go up.

As her eyes got better used to their new surroundings, it became apparent that she wasn't going down, either. Nor did she seem to be drowning. So she stopped struggling and looked around. She saw, basically, water.

"Excuse me."

Polijn turned toward the sound. After looking at the water there for some time, she decided that some of the water was bluer than the rest. The blue water congealed into the form of a naked man.

"I beg your pardon," said this figure, "but should I know you?"

Polijn didn't know how to answer this. She looked left and right.

"Is something wrong?"

Polijn shrugged. "I can't usually breathe underwater."

"I see. But your handicap need not trouble you so long as I feel like keeping you alive. That's why I'm asking. Should I know you?"

"I'm not sure," Polijn told him. "Do you think you should?"

"You bear a talisman of power," he replied, pointing to the amulet in her hand. "I wondered if you're a wizard from some land-locked country, one that I just haven't met yet, or met so long ago I've forgotten you."

Polijn nodded. Now what would make more trouble: claiming the powers of the amulet or admitting she didn't have the slightest idea how to get out of this mess? She tried to read a clue in the figure's face, but that face kept shifting.

"No," she said, finally, "you wouldn't know me. This was just a gift."

"Welladay!" exclaimed the figure. "A human that speaks the truth! You know, we don't often see your like on the sea. Is that how you came to fall in, then? No sea legs? No head for water travel?"

"Nearly no head at all," she told him, and explained the profitable business worked by the captain and crew of the *Ten Firebirds*.

"I thought we were seeing more humans coming down the last couple of years," the water figure said. "But we all thought it was just bad sailors. That's bad, that's too bad. We can't have that. You go right up there and give him what for."

"Oh," said Polijn. She twirled the amulet in her hand. "I don't really know how to use this."

"That much I had divined by myself," said the figure. "Never fear. Use this: it's not so powerful, but it is easier to use."

Water before her eyes cleared and coalesced into a disc like the one she held, except that the new talisman was blue, transparent, like the donor. "This," he said, "gives you the power to command the sea, by which I mean not only the water that is the sea but that which is in the water and that which blows over it."

Polijn wouldn't have touched the thing for worlds, but somehow found it insinuating itself into her hand. "Thank you," she said, since there didn't seem to be much of a choice.

"I shall, however, reclaim it—and you—should you put it to some use that is unworthy of it." He seemed to shrug, though the movement was hard to follow in the water. "I cannot judge you, after all, by the fact that once you told the truth."

Polijn licked her lips. "Thank you," she said again, with even less sincerity than the first time.

"Exactly so," said the figure. "Now, I hope you have some plan for returning to the ship and punishing the miscreants."

She supposed he had a point. There would be time to consider the complications later; for now she had to decide what to do about events on board the *Ten Firebirds*. In view of the fact that captain and crew were probably old hands at the disarming and looting of an unwilling group, it had best be something quick. And big.

Cocking an eyebrow at the blue man, Polijn began to command the winds and waters.

On deck, the crew of the *Ten Firebirds* was very busy; Ponsan had genuine skill with that long blade. Thus they noticed nothing unusual about the weather until the broad shadow fell across the ship. The captain was first to look up.

"By Ponteri's teeth!" he cried.

A vast bird made entirely of water had risen from the surface of the gulf. "Who dares offend against the laws of the sea?" roared a woman astride the bird's neck. She had a carrying voice, and the wind was with her.

Everyone stood stock still to watch the bird approach. Polijn spotted three people floating in the water. A wave of her hand and frogs made of the gulf bounded onto the ship, each with a dazed passenger between its eyes. Two of the frog riders, she noticed, were crewmen. That would help.

The bird swooped down at the deck. "The captain of the *Ten Firebirds* has trifled with those who have power over wind and water!" she shouted. If she could hold the captain solely responsible, this would be over the quicker. Going after the whole crew would probably mean a tussle, and some of the other passengers might be killed before she could do anything about it.

One crewman, not entirely convinced by the display of power, swung a club as the bird came by. The massive waterfowl put its head down, opened its beak, and pummeled the target to the deck with a stream of fish.

Polijn brought the wind to bear, knocking down the remaining crew members but leaving Ponsan standing. "The sea wants the captain of the *Ten Firebirds*!" she bellowed.

"It can have him!" someone called back.

The bird deposited Polijn on the deck and, with the frogs, dived back into the gulf. Polijn set her hands on her hips. Water flew from her body in a fine spray, less for the effect than to let her clothes dry.

Her head came around so she could see each member of her silent, staring audience. "Well?" she said.

Everybody who was capable of movement lunged at the captain. The big man was hauled to the deck, shouting, "By Ponteri's teeth, I'll have every man of you dangling from the mast! I'll . . ."

A crewman shoved a fist in among the curses, and several others would have followed suit, but Polijn raised a hand. "No need to

break any teeth; he has few enough left now. Do you think I'm afraid of what so puny a foe can say? One man seems to have been able to hold him off, aye, and his crew as well!"

She moved over to Ponsan and noted, "You're good with that sword for someone who says he doesn't like to use it."

"I don't mind if the other people can fight back," he told her.

"What're you going to do with him?" demanded the fat woman, looking as though she had more than a few suggestions.

That, Polijn knew, was the prize question, the real challenge at the end of the contest. One of the worst features of power that came as a gift was that it always came with strings, no, with chains attached.

But this was no time to show indecision; that would spoil the act. "First," she said, "we must try him and pronounce him guilty of murder and theft, and of transgressing against the laws of hospitality on the sea."

"I . . ." the captain began.

"Quiet," she said. "You're guilty. Now we have to decree proper punishment. Ponsan, you will cut off his hands, feet, and head, and toss the bits into the gulf from each side of the ship."

Ponsan threw her a look of reproach, but raised his sword. The *Ten Firebirds* began to pitch as rough water charged around it.

"After . . ." Polijn said. The water calmed a bit. The sword pulled back.

"After he has made amends for his transgressions against the spirits of the waters," she went on. "For his crimes against his passengers are as great an offense to them as to the laws of humans. Before he can be allowed his death, he must use the *Ten Firebirds* to carry good Silmarian stone, in blocks six feet in every direction, to build temples to, er, Ponteri on each coast, at opposite ends of his route. These temples shall be twenty times his height, and just as long and wide."

"But, ma'am," said one of the crew members, "the *Ten Firebirds* couldn't carry but two or three such stones each trip. Not and carry enough cargo to pay our living, too."

"I am sure the captain sees the wisdom of that," Polijn pointed out. "The longer he takes to build his temples, the longer he lives. Ponsan, you will accompany the captain as guard and executioner, to kill him when the work is done."

The executioner smiled. "Yes, ma'am."

"Now, let him go," she ordered the crew and passengers who were holding the captain. "I assume you'll see to it that these passengers get their goods back, and a little more, to pay for their trouble."

"Of course, of course," said the captain, rubbing his wrists. "Er, you'll not be coming along yourself, ma'am, to see me build these temples?"

She raised her nose. "Certainly not. I have important duties."

"Well, ma'am, you needn't worry. I'll certainly do as you've ordered." He winked at his crew. The crew did not wink back, uncertain which side the wind was going to favor. Ponsan did look a bit concerned.

"See that you do," she told him. "For there are witnesses to what you have said, beyond those on board this vessel. Do you swear to build the temples, by Ponteri's teeth?"

"That I do, ma'am," said the captain, making some kind of hand signal on his chest. "By Ponteri's teeth, I swear it."

Polijn turned toward the port side of the ship. "Then," she called, "come forth, Ponteri!"

She had guessed correctly that the captain would be swearing by some guardian spirit of the gulf, and that it was the same being she'd met. She was startled at the size of the creature. He had looked so much smaller in his own element. Now he rose higher than the ship itself, water spraying around him and catching the sunlight until he stood in a brilliant haze.

"I have heard every word," boomed a voice like the crash of tides. "And I approve. To be sure, I've had chapels, but never a temple. See that you take care of that, captain, and you'll find the winds favor you. As for you, my lady, you seem to show some sense. Are you sure you wouldn't like to stay and be a priestess in one of those temples?"

"Thank you for your offer," said Polijn with a bow, "but business really does call me elsewhere."

It called her anywhere out of reach of the sea. Spending her whole life with a talisman of power and worrying about whether she was doing something unworthy of it would be a bad business indeed. Henceforth, she was going to praise the sea, but stay on land.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

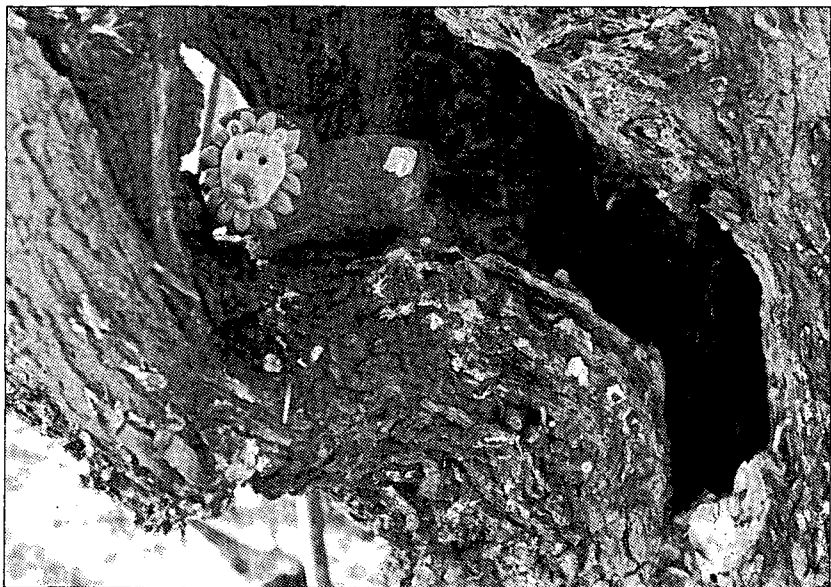
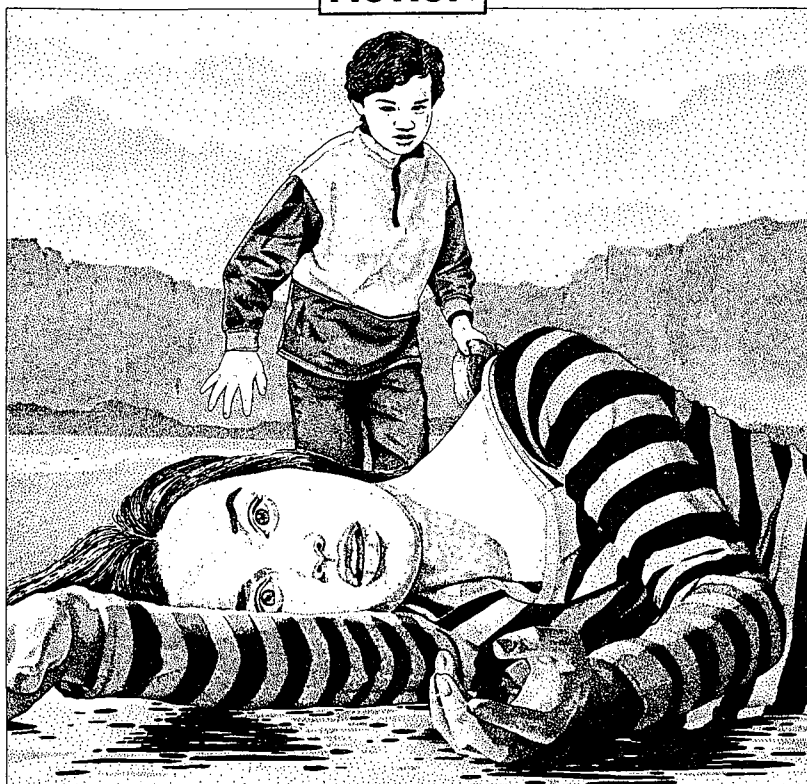


Photo by Myrna J. Yancey

In the catbird seat. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "October Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the May Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 155.

FICTION



Wicked Twist

by D. A. McGuire

Steve Cavallo

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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“What’s your name again . . . kid?”

I hadn’t liked him from the start, this obnoxious, tobacco-chewing cop. Imagine that, a cop chewing tobacco, a thick brown wad of it. I didn’t think that very professional, or the way his fat belly poked out over a worn brown belt. It didn’t match his pants, and that told me something right away: he’d gotten too fat for the belt that did match his policeman’s uniform. As my friend Mr. Horn-ton would have said, this cop was not “a man of detail.”

But I was. Even though I wasn’t exactly a man, not yet. Me, I *saw* detail, I lived and breathed detail. So no cop was going to brush me off so easily; after all, it was *me* who found the body.

“Herbie Sawyer,” I answered respectfully. But I didn’t say “sir” because I didn’t think he deserved it. I was sure of it when he answered, sneering as he did.

“Herbie? As in Herbert? Hell of a thing, naming a kid Herbert.” He was writing this down on a clipboard that stuck out of his fat side. It was obvious he wasn’t accustomed to this, to standing on a muddy bank, one foot propped in the sand, the other on a dune that was slowly sinking under his

immense weight. If he didn’t move soon, he was going to tumble right down the bank and into the inlet.

I would have liked to have seen that.

“It was my father’s name,” I said sharply.

“Oh, that a fact?” Another sneer down his long, fat nose. Italian, probably. Figured. Then I shot that thought out of my head as fast as it had entered it. My mother wouldn’t have liked it.

The cop turned, spat a thick brown curd of tobacco juice into the grass, then moved quickly before he could tumble down the little incline. There were four people down there now, in addition to the body. The first was a fellow in a pale sports jacket—he must have been the medical examiner. They’d had to wait for him, supposedly he’d been getting ready to go out fishing. Tough luck for him, but with this heavy fog it probably would be better to wait. Then there was another cop, dressed a lot more professionally than this fat one. He was kind of on his knees, holding a plastic tarp, probably to cover the body with. There was a woman down there with them; she was black and neatly dressed, in civilian clothes, jeans and a red sweatshirt, but I got the feeling she was a cop, too. She was pho-

tographing the body, the sandbar it was stuck on, and the immediate area—marsh, banks, even the mouth of the inlet facing out to the bay. And there was a third man; he was the most interesting of the group. He wasn't dressed like a cop either, but I knew he had to be one. He seemed to be in charge, what with the way he talked to the others and then stood back to let them do their jobs. After a few minutes he moved in, motioning to the woman to take some extra shots. He was wearing dark pants and a pale shirt and was a bit on the heavy side but had something about him called "presence."

Yes, that's how my mother would have put it: the man had presence, like Burt Lancaster or Kirk Douglas—my mother was hopelessly stuck back in the fifties.

And now this man was starting to walk up towards us. As he did, I gave the fat cop my address, my mother's name and employer, and information on how I'd found the body. "You the kid who called us?" the other man said, the one with "presence," as he came up the incline. Maybe he was some kind of detective or just a cop called out of bed at five thirty on a Sunday morning. No, he would have put on a uniform if he had one. He was a detective.

I had him pegged right from the start. I also had him pegged as someone I was going to like a hell of a lot better than the tobacco-spitting, rude cop.

"Yes, sir," I said quickly, balancing my bike against my leg. I swear both legs were going to sleep; I felt like I wanted to go to sleep. The bait in my bike basket was starting to reek, and I wanted nothing more than to forget my traps, go home and sit out on the porch, and maybe read some comic books.

Except I'm sure I wouldn't have seen the pages, or the characters in them, or any of the writing, half of which I skipped over anyway. I would have seen her, just *her*. The body of the woman down there, the one they were covering up now. The body I'd seen that other cop, the uniformed one holding the tarp, get sick over. The body the medical examiner, if that's who he was, was shaking his head over as he dictated something into a cassette recorder attached to his belt.

The body of the woman I'd found in the early morning fog down in the inlet.

"Herbie Sawyer, age twelve," the fat cop said, showing the clipboard to the other man. "Haven't finished getting a complete statement from him yet. I don't think he can tell us

very much, just a kid out here chubbing—has some traps over there in the marsh. Ain't that right, Herbie?"

"Yeah, I was chubbing," I answered directly.

"You didn't touch anything, did you, Herbie?" the other man said, a man who would later introduce himself to me as Jake Valari, a detective sergeant and the only detective we had on the small police force here in Manamesset Village.

"No. Who'd want to?" I answered, making a disgusted face. "I mean, no, sir, of course not. I came running up here and went to Old Man Miller's shack and called the police."

At the mention of Old Man Miller, both men smiled. The fat, rude one snickered. Old Jedediah Miller had been of absolutely no use. When I'd told him about the body, he'd nearly fallen across his tiny kitchen and pulled a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniel's off the counter. It was me who'd called the police, dialed 911 like I was supposed to.

And in a way that part had been exciting, watching the ambulance come tearing up, then the police cars. Exciting for a while. And then a drag, waiting up here until they got the medical examiner out, then waiting some more as they located the town police chief.

Turned out he was on an over-nighter on Martha's Vineyard and it would be awhile until he could get a ferry out. Planes were all fogged in. So that's probably why this other cop, this Detective Valari, was in charge.

Anyhow, they'd told me to wait up with the old man (he was sleeping, dead drunk) until they got around to me.

But it was me who found her, the body down in the inlet, on the gray muck and sand, at about five fifteen this morning, with the tide still going out. It was now seven fifteen. The sky was brightening up a bit, the fog drifting off, though it would be nearly noon before it'd all be gone. We'd had three days of this heavy morning fog. It rolled out around noontime, drifted back in by early evening. Sometimes it was like that down here on the southernmost tip of Cape Cod, at Manamesset Bay.

"Can I go soon, sir?" I asked the detective. I bumped against my bike meaningfully. I didn't usually drag it down through the dunes and up to the bank, but I hadn't trusted leaving it down by the road. Some of the summer kids thought nothing of taking a local's bike, driving it down into the marsh, thought it was a big joke. Any-

how, I wanted these two to see how anxious I was to go.

The detective just looked at me a moment. Like I said, he was on the heavy side, but he had a different carriage from the other man. That's how my mother would have put it: he carried himself well. This man's weight came from good living. I was sure of it, from playing cards and passing around the snacks as he did so, or from going out fishing with his buddies, and eating out at good restaurants. Maybe even from making his own food—pasta. Yeah, I could imagine him stirring a big pot of pasta, making up his own sauce. The other fellow, his weight came from beer. I'd have known that sloppy, overlapping belly anywhere.

I also knew the smell.

"If you've given us all the information we need, then you can go. We may still want to talk to you again later, Herbie." He also had steadier feet, up here on the uncertain edge of the bank. And as he looked around and across the marshy inlet, then up towards the pale gray sands of Gray Tides Beach, he asked, "Come out here very often, Herbie?"

"To chub, sir? Sometimes, but all of that—" I pointed in the direction he was looking, across the marsh, most of

which lay on the other side of the inlet. It was the inlet, a hundred feet from side to side at its mouth, where it emptied into Manamesset Bay, that broke this stretch of coastline into two beaches, Gray Tides to the north and Miller's, behind us where we stood. But we could see barely a quarter of the way up Gray Tides; fog obscured the rest. Boothby Harbor was in that direction, and Boothby shores, Boothby Village. "It's private, I mean, it's all bird sanctuary. I... we never go in there, sir."

I was lying; he knew I was lying, too. I could tell by his face. Still, he smiled, then fished inside his shirt pocket for a pack of cigarettes. The other one, the one I didn't like, had shifted his weight again so he was no longer in imminent danger of falling down the bank. Too bad.

"Gray Tides Bird Sanctuary and Preserve, yes, I know. You don't usually see too many people down here."

Was that a question? I answered like it was. "No, sir. There are too many other beaches around here, nicer beaches with lifeguards and the rocks and seaweed all cleared away. I mean, especially up at Boothby. The tourists don't come here much. It's too wild. We sometimes see a

few birdwatchers, maybe some scientists, you know? From Woods Hole, or people studying green flies. There's boxes all through there."

"Boxes?"

"To catch the flies in. I guess they count them. I..." I shrugged; there'd been flies, just a few, on her body "... don't really know."

"But I think you do," Sergeant Valari hadn't lit his cigarette yet. He was studying me in a way I didn't exactly like. "I think you do know, quite a lot, that is. Maybe we *can* have a little chat now, what do you say?"

Why did I get uneasy then? Because something about a cop, a smart cop, always makes a kid uneasy?

"How about up there?" He motioned to the shack behind us up the shore away, then lit his cigarette. It was Old Man Miller's shack—and Old Man Miller was still up there, sleeping off all the booze he'd drunk over the last two hours.

"Sure." I shrugged and gently lowered my bike back onto the sand.

He got rid of the fat one with an "I'll finish up with him here" and a passing of the clipboard. We watched him slip and slide down the bank towards the inlet. Then we just stood there a minute, me and this smart cop,

and I watched the scene below while he read the information Officer Carleton had written down about me.

And what I had found. How I had come down to check my chub traps, two hours before low tide. How I'd seen something bright red there, lying on the small sandbar that had formed this summer in the middle of the inlet. It was new, that sandbar, and strange, fixed behind a pile of old crates that must have fallen off a boat somewhere out in the bay. The tides, or a storm, had brought them in, broken them up a bit, then fixed them in the muck, right in the middle of the little waterway near its mouth. They wouldn't last long; the next storm, hurricane, whatever, would pry them loose, or the water itself would rot them out. It didn't matter to a sandbar; sandbars are a temporary kind of thing. They form behind anything for any length of time. This one had formed long enough to catch a dead body on it.

Wearing a red shirt, brown checked kneelength shorts, and a rope belt tied around them. Remember that, I said to myself. It's a detail. And there were sneakers on her, too, an old fashioned Keds-style that so many adults were wearing today. So that wasn't really un-

usual, the sneakers I mean, except for the fact that there were holes in them—right at the toes, both of them.

She had blonde hair, long and untied. And her hands were stretched out ahead of her. In fact, she'd looked like one of those Moslems, bent over and praying towards the bay. At first I'd thought it was just a woman, a live one, doing some crazy exercises on the little bar that barely broke the water as the tide went rushing out. Then, as I got closer, I thought maybe she was digging for clams; with the fog so thick it was hard to see just exactly *what* she was doing. But when I got close enough and could hear the buzz of green flies—they flew off in a green cloud as I splashed through the water toward her—I knew she was dead. Just lying there, dead. She wasn't moving, just lying kind of on her side, both arms spread forward, her face turned sideways and away from me. One leg was stretched out straight, the other was kind of bent and pointing down into the sand. Anyhow I figured she had to be dead, lying there in half an inch of water, so still. Only the tips of her hair were moving, swaying back and forth in the water like seaweed pulsing in shallow water.

So I splashed my way through the water—the tide was going out, and the water on both sides of the bar was about ten inches deep. I could feel it pulling me as I walked, then I was up on the bar with her. I couldn't see her face, not yet, but I could feel my heart thumping in my chest. I was wondering if I should cry out, except who would hear me? Maybe I should have jumped back in the water right away, climbed the bank, and run up to Old Man Miller's shack. Of course, that's what I soon did do, but I suppose a lot of people would have done that right off; they never would have gone down to . . . well, look her over.

But then, part of me was saying, what if she *is* alive? And just hurt? Well? What about *that*? So even though my heart was going crazy a-mile-a-minute, and I was starting to feel queasy in my stomach, I looked down at her. I was absorbing details.

The clothes. The hair. The rope belt—it looked like clothesline twine. The sneakers. And her fingernails: long and colored a pale pink, except most were broken and cracked. Some had a dark black line stuck deep beneath them, near the flesh. I could see all this only on her left hand; it was turned in an awkward position

down on the sand. Her other one was partly in the mud. But on her left: thumbnail broken; index and middle finger, too. Black lines under the index, middle, and ring fingers. And something white, like a glob of sea foam, jabbed right on the nail of her little finger.

That's when I walked around her, carefully, like she might suddenly jump up and bite me. I saw her face—two glassy, blackish eyes where the green flies were landing—and watched in strange fascination as a fiddler crab crawled out of her open mouth.

The cop had said something to me; I guess I wasn't paying attention. I turned to him.

"Sorry, sir, I was . . . day-dreaming. What did you say?"

"You're damned polite for a kid your age. What's with all this 'sir' stuff? Who taught you to be so polite, or is it all an act, Mr. Herbie Sawyer?" He took a long drag on his cigarette.

"My mother, sir," I answered stiffly. But I had a question of my own suddenly. Down on the other side of the inlet the cop who'd gotten sick earlier was unrolling something that looked like yellow tape off a spool. The fat cop was picking up some sticks. Bending over wasn't easy for him; he was grunting and groaning as he did and making the other cop

run around like crazy. I guessed they were going to put the sticks in the marsh, and up and down the inlet, to kind of cordon off the area.

"What are they doing," I asked, then, remembering, added, "sergeant?"

"Just a formality, son, to keep the reporters away, and anyone else who comes nosing around later. And they will. They always do." A sigh as he watched with me. "To keep them from disturbing the area—you must watch TV, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," I said. "But the area's going to be disturbed real soon anyhow, isn't it? And you won't be able to do a thing about it, will you?" I turned to look at him, adding, "Sir."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The tide, sir, the tide will be on its way back. It's dead low at seven oh-two. Right about now. So it'll be turning around and coming back in, and that'll disturb the crime scene, won't it?"

"Dead low?" he said with a frown, as though it should already have occurred to him. And then: "Crime scene? What do you mean, 'crime scene'?" He sounded irritated suddenly. "We don't know any crime has been committed, Mr. Herbie Sawyer. Now, let's get on up there and have ourselves a little talk."

“**Y**ou live at 11 Falmouth Hill Drive. Pretty classy address, Herbie,” Sergeant Valari spread the clipboard and sheets on his lap. We were up on Old Man Miller’s porch, or what passed for a porch. It was really kind of a sloping platform facing the water side. Piled in the flattest corner near the house was a pile of junk—wire baskets, diggers and trowels, frayed bits of rope, and a pile of buoys, some wood, some Styrofoam. There was also a box filled with horseshoe crab shells, whelk egg cases, pieces of driftwood, old shoes, sneakers, and other stuff. The whole “porch” was actually nothing more than an oceanic junkyard, just as his house was really no more than a shack—sticks and boards pasted together, a temporary cabin sitting up on a shifting, manmade beach that someday, and soon, would tear it down and take it out to sea.

“The next hurricane’ll do it,” the old man had told me once, and I believed it.

Inside, behind us in the house, we could hear Jedadiah Miller’s deep snores. Sergeant Valari said he’d get “Mr. Miller’s statement” later.

So now I sat on the sloping boards, my feet in the sand, staring at this cop as he sorted

through my “statement” concerning how I’d found the body, what I’d been doing in the marsh at that time of morning, where I lived.

“We don’t live there all the time,” I said respectfully. So the man had forgotten about the tide; I forget things, too. It’s just that a kid my age, who lives so close to the marsh and the tides, thinks it’s pretty odd when others don’t take it into consideration.

But maybe he had. Maybe at the start of our “relationship” or “friendship” or whatever you like to call it, Jake Valari and I were simply underestimating each other. We hadn’t yet figured out that where his knowledge as a police officer and mine as a kid who tramped these marshes and knew their tides and currents like the back of my hand, where these two “areas of expertise” (as one of my teachers would say) overlapped, maybe it would be there that we’d find an answer.

Some kind of answer to the body of the woman lying down on the sandbar in the inlet.

“Oh? Where do you live—most of the time?” he asked.

“Wherever my mother can find a place. We rent. Except in summer. We live at 11 Falmouth Hill free in the summer. It’s right behind Rock of the

Bay Inn. My mother works there."

"What does she do?" Now he was writing.

"She's a . . . a maid. Makes up beds and . . ." I let my head hang, then turned away. I didn't want to see any pity on this man's face. I'd decided I liked him. I focused on a wire basket dropped in the sand, a trowel and a digger sticking out of it.

"I see. You stay there, rent-free, for the summer?"

"Yeah, but we got the best floor. It's a three story, real old. We're on the ground floor and it's got two bedrooms *and* a porch, screened in." I turned back to look at him. "Above us the kids live."

"Kids?"

"College kids. Two lifeguards—pool guards—another chambermaid, and a couple of waitresses. My mother takes care of the whole house, makes sure they don't have wild parties, that kind of thing. You know? Teenagers." I said the last word with the same scorn my mother would. She called them all teenagers, even though two were in their twenties.

But he understood, said, "Yeah, I know teenagers. Got two of my own."

"Do you, sir?"

"Listen, Herbie." He clapped the clipboard down on his

heavy thighs and stared straight at me. The morning sun was coming in stronger now, trying to force itself through the thick and stubborn swatch of fog still hugging the beach. There were gulls flapping across the shore, landing not twenty feet from us. Old Man Miller threw out scraps to them; they were waiting there, not knowing us from the old man snoring his brains out behind us. Some of the gulls had already given up, were now winging their way out to a series of sandbars just visible now that the tide was out. The bars ran in a series of parallel lines to the beach; the closest one you could walk to and barely get your feet wet.

"Yes, sir?" I finally said.

"Quit calling me sir, will you? My own kids don't treat me as good as you do." A quick smile and he killed his cigarette in the sand. I looked at it, thinking it was not a very wise thing to do. Shouldn't someone be looking over this whole area? Looking for . . . evidence?

Still, I liked his smile and decided he rather liked me, too. That was good, didn't hurt for a kid my age to have a cop as a friend. Might come in handy someday.

"So this is your temporary address, but your address for the summer, am I right?"

"Right . . . sir."

He smiled again, shook his head, and started to write again. "You came out this morning to check your chub traps, found the body. You told Officer Carleton you didn't touch it."

"That's correct. I told him that."

He picked up the tone in my voice, gave me a clever, side-long glance. "You don't like Officer Carleton, do you? Don't worry about it, not many people do." He turned back to the clipboard. "You came up here, used Mr. Miller's phone—" He turned to look at the house with a weary, if somewhat confused, look. "Hard to believe he's even got a phone."

"Got electricity, too. See there?" I pointed out where the two lines snaked across the upper beach on rickety poles. "They fall down all the time, but he always gets someone out here to put 'em back up. Got to have his TV, you know."

"Strange old fella, living out here—a bad storm'll wash him right out to sea."

There he betrayed himself at last. He was a Cape Codder; I knew it in the expression, the wistfulness of his eyes. I also knew something else right away: if that coroner or whoever down in the inlet decided that there was any way at all

that woman had been *murdered*, then the first and most natural suspect would be poor old Jedadiah Miller, snoring about twenty-five feet behind me in his cabin.

And this cop knew it, too, and that was the reason for the sudden and confused wistfulness on his face.

Swiftly, I added, "Yes, sir, and so he says himself. But no one's getting him off this beach before his time, preserve or not. It starts here, you see, I mean it will, when he's dead, or his house gets blown down. His family owned all this side before they sold it to Lady Brant, she owned the other, and now it all belongs to the government—the *federal* government."

"Not yet it don't," he corrected me gently. "Not for another five years, because if'n it did—" he was teasing me, and I smiled—"you'd be setting here talking to a *federal* agent and not some little backwoods Cape Cod police sergeant."

"Yes, sir, I understand how you mean. They say Lady Brant didn't want to see no more development along here. Or so says Old Man Miller. He says she felt guilty for what her family did—she was a Boothby, did you know? Anyhow, when they dredged the harbor, Boothby Harbor I mean, they

dumped all the sand and dirt and rocks here. They buried most of the marsh, filled it all in. Except for that little bit, and it's coming back; I heard some Woods Hole people talk about it in school."

He just looked at me like he was studying me. He didn't ask any questions, neither did he interrupt. So I went rambling on.

"Anyhow, Old Man Miller, he can stay here until he's gone, or his house, then this whole section goes over to her family and they'll pass it on as part of the preserve. I think that's how it happens. He can't rebuild either, even if a hurricane blows him down and takes him out to sea. It's too bad, isn't it?"

"Let's forget about old Jedediah Miller for a minute. After you called the police, you didn't go back to look at the body, did you?"

"No, sir, I waited with Old Man . . . with Mr. Miller. He finished off nearly half a bottle of . . . whisky, I think it was, while I sat there and watched some talk show out of Providence. Boring show."

He gave half a laugh. "You're a good boy, Herbie, but I think you know that. You didn't see anything else, now, did you? People? Cars? A boat?"

"No. No, I didn't."

"Then I want to tell you something, there'll be reporters down here soon enough, snooping around, trying to get information out of you and Mr. Miller. I want to know if I can depend on you."

"You can, sir. I won't say anything but the way I saw it."

"That's the problem, Herbie. I don't want you to say anything, except you found a body, then ran up here and called the police. I don't want you to say you went down near it, do you understand?"

I just sat there, grinding my feet in the sand. He went on.

"Don't describe her. I can't forbid you, but I'm asking you not to. Her family, do you understand?"

He said that in a funny kind of way, almost strained, so I ventured a guess: "Do you know who she is, sir?"

"I might." He started fishing for another cigarette.

"Do you think you know how it happened?"

"I don't know, Herbie. It looks like the tide probably brought her in. She could've been swimming. High tide was when? Just after midnight?"

"Twelve fifty A.M."

"Twelve fifty. So . . . maybe she was swimming. Last night, Saturday. Lots of parties out in the bay, on the boats. She

might have been swimming, and in the fog . . . ”

It was all wrong, and he knew it. “She wasn’t wearing any bathing suit.”

“Shouldn’t be talking to you like this. I’m just asking you to keep quiet about her. You can run along now, go check your traps while the tide’s still low; I’ll tell them you can go past. Then I’m going to wait a while and try to get a statement out of . . . Mr. Miller.”

I rose to my feet slowly, looking down at the man a moment. He seemed tired then; he’d probably been roused out of a sound sleep by my call this morning.

“Or maybe it was a fishing mishap,” he said, shrugging as though he hoped that’s all it was. “I’m just wild guessing while I get something official from Dr. Chados.”

“She wasn’t swimming, sir, and she wasn’t fishing either. It looked to me like she was dressed for something else.”

Regret crept over his face; tossing suggestions off me probably hadn’t been a very good idea. For all he knew, I’d go and blab everything to the first reporter who showed me a new ten dollar bill. But he didn’t know me; wild horses wouldn’t drag anything more out of me than what he said was okay.

“And what do *you* think she was dressed for, Herbie?” he asked, face becoming wistful again, and then something more again: he looked sad. He’d known this dead lady, of that I was sure.

“For clamming, sir.” And with that I shuffled off across the sand to get my bike.

Wild horses, however, didn’t take into account Mr. Hornton, because if I hadn’t had him to tell, I simply would have burst wide open.

“She wasn’t swimming, Mr. Hornton, I know that,” I told him as I helped him mix his paint. “I’m not supposed to tell anyone. I didn’t even go home. I guess I’m afraid there’ll be reporters waiting there, like on TV. But she wasn’t swimming, and I don’t think she was fishing either. Women don’t go fishing alone, not at night or early in the morning, and not in the fog.”

Elmer Hornton said nothing, but he did give me a shrewd look out of the corner of his eye.

“You see, she was dressed in shorts and a shirt, and they didn’t look right, you know how I mean? And she had pink fingernails, light pink, and some of them were real long but some were broken.” I looked

down at my own hand, my stumpy fingers, and tried to remember exactly how hers had looked. "And she was wearing a rope belt. You see what I mean? It wasn't a *belt* but a piece of twine, like clothesline twine. Her sneakers were beat up, too, holes in the toes, and I think maybe she was wearing old clothes because . . ." That's when I wore down; I was seeing her face, her black glassy eyes, and . . .

The crab come out of her mouth. I swallowed and helped him carry the paint cans out into his gravel driveway. He was lettering a boat, a small dinghy. Mr. Hornton was a great letterer, a man of "infinite detail," as he liked to put it.

"Fell off a boat, maybe," he suggested as he pulled a crate up to the dinghy, placed his assortment of slender, fine-tipped brushes in front of him. He had holes in the crate, between his legs, and set a brush in each. "They have some pretty wild parties out there in the bay." He paused in his selection of a brush, then looked at me. "You tell your mother yet?"

"No. She'll find out on the TV, I suppose. She always has it on when she's cleaning rooms." I sat myself down on a crate at his side. The fog was gone now, earlier than I ex-

pected, not even noon yet. The sun beat down on my dark head, his white one, fiercely. It was going to be a hot one.

"The tide brought her in, Mr. Hornton, I'm sure of it. No matter how or where she died, the tide brought her in, and dumped her right there on that sandbar. It probably carried her in around one o'clock last night, I mean this morning. That was high tide, and it's a wonder she didn't float right up into the marsh. It's a full moon tide, you know."

Then I thought about it some more. The tide could have brought her in even *earlier* than that. It would be moving into the inlet and marsh as early as eight, nine o'clock at night.

But he said nothing; he was licking one of his brushes to a thin, needle-tipped point.

"You know what a full moon high tide is like? The way it rushes into the inlet? Damn, it's dangerous. A teacher at school told me it's called a rip current. Can carry you in and—"

"And can carry you out. You ain't been going down near the inlet when the tide's going out, have you? You never try to cross it then, boy. I told you what happened to Cherry Morton back in '62?"

"A dozen times." I didn't mean to be disrespectful, neither did I want to hear about Cherry Morton for the thirteenth time, so I very quickly added, "But they got their experts, the police do, and they'll tell when she died and how she died and if there were strangulation marks or gunshot wounds or if she got stabbed or—"

He cut me off just as cleanly as if I weren't talking at all. "Cherry Morton, out of the navy on leave and expecting to go back, make a real career of it, he was. Out there clamming, trying to help the family, bring in a free meal as we called it then; he was up on the Tides side. A big bar there was, rich with clams—God, small, delicate, beautiful things. Anyhow, he tried to cross over to Miller's side when the tide was going out. Fool. Must have been drinking. I say to this day, must have been drinking. I don't know what he could have been thinking. The tides pulled him out, and the very next day they brought him back in again."

"It's not really the tide that takes you out," I corrected the old man carefully. "The current forms like this . . ." I grabbed a brush he wasn't using and a piece of scrap cardboard, and began to carefully draw a pic-

ture for him. "Here's the inlet—" I drew a U-shape "—and here's the beaches, Miller's side and Tides side. If two longshore currents meet, right there at the mouth of the inlet, they push each other out, away from the beach. *Then*, if the tide is going out, too, and the currents all meet together, then you got one powerful rush of water sweeping out into the bay. My teacher at school said the way to escape a rip current is to—"

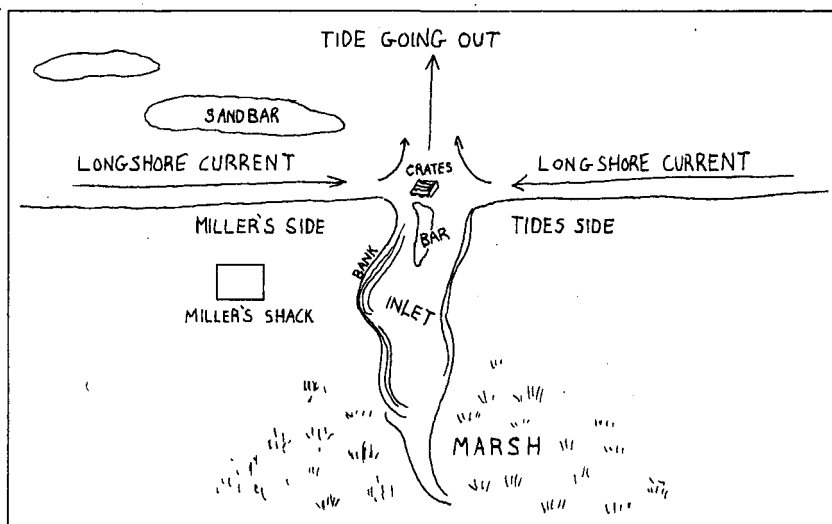
"Damn, it's a rip *tide*, no matter what some teacher at school tells you. The tide emptying out of that inlet is what sucks you out, boy. The inlet is damned deep farther in—hell of a lot of water rushing out when the tide's moving, especially at full moon. Anyone stuck in *that* ain't gonna get out, no matter what some teacher says. You just suck water and sink."

"You suppose that's what happened to this lady I found? She sucked water and—"

"I don't know what happened to her, but Cherry Morton was a damned fine swimmer, was in training to be a frogman, boy, a *navy* frogman. But he got pulled out, and *I was there*. I saw him get pulled out, and then he just went under. He wasn't more than waist-deep when he just got . . . sucked under." He scratched his head,

stared at me. "Tide took him out and a bunch of us went looking for him, from a boat. Gibby Swenson, he went in to look around for Cherry, but we barely got *him* back into the boat alive. He was cursing and swearing when we did, said he never saw anything like it, and it felt like the maw of some gi-

drew in nearer me, taking my diagram as he did. "Jedadiah Miller. Nothing happens on his beach without him taking notice of it. Who do you think calls the police every time they get them nude sunbathers on the preserve? Him, I bet, after he gets a good look-see through his binoculars first." A laugh, a



ant thing, just sucking everything right out into the bay. 'Course Gibby was liable to exaggerate now and then, but anyhow, we didn't see Cherry again until next day, lying up there in the marsh, just like your dead lady. So, no, I don't know what happened to *her*, but I can tell you this . . ." He

belch, and then he looked off, embarrassed, staring at the dinghy he was supposed to be lettering.

He got good money for putting stupid names on rich people's boats. This one was going to be called the *Honey Pot*.

"Think I should go tell Sergeant Valari that?"

"You tell him anything you like, Herbie. But you're right, they got their experts, and not only fellas who'll tell them when and how she died and all of that, but about tides and currents and such. They'll figure it all out—you wait and see."

"But he forgot about the tides. I think he remembered them when we were sitting there and talking. I think he knew her, too. He looked awful strange when I mentioned them... like he'd forgot and when I said something about them..."

"So maybe his mind is twisting and turning the same way yours is," the man said agreeably enough, now that his mind was off Cherry Morton and how he'd died.

"And maybe she was shot, too, by a jealous husband and pushed off a boat," I said a bit glumly, recalling the plot of some inane television show I'd seen a few nights before. "But if you did that, you'd want to weight the body down, wouldn't you? So it wouldn't bob up, right?"

"You have a ghoulish streak in you, my boy. It worries me, it does." But he was smiling. "Why don't you plan to stick around a while, have some lunch with me? And if you like, I'll call and speak to your

mother so she knows where to find you."

He was thinking the same as me: this story had probably broken on television by now; it was nearly eleven. And if it had, my mother'd already seen it.

"Thanks, Mr. Hornton, I'd appreciate it an awful lot if you would."

There wasn't anything on the Boston station about the woman yet, figured. But on a Providence station, Channel 8, we found this:

"Tragedy struck a prominent Cape Cod family, the Brants of Boothby Shores, early today. This morning the body of Cynthia Allan Brant, wife of well-known attorney Steven Brant, was found washed up on the beach at Gray Tides Bird Sanctuary and Wildlife Preserve. It appears that Mrs. Brant might have been trying to cross the lower bay in the fog between seven and eight last night and fell from her skiff, the *Wicked Twist Two*. Mr. and Mrs. Brant's sailing yacht, the *Wicked Twist*, was moored in Manamesset Bay just off the wildlife preserve. Police will reveal few details at this time, but the Coast Guard has joined in the search for the missing skiff." A picture came on the screen of a small green dinghy,

lettered on the stern *Wicked Twist*². And as I stared at it, I realized I'd seen it before, out in Boothby Harbor, tied up alongside a magnificent sailboat, a forty-footer, the *Wicked Twist*.

"We will return in our broadcast to update you on any further developments . . ."

I stopped eating at that point, spoon in mid-air, then plopped it back in my bowl of chowder. Elmer Hornton made the best clam chowder of anyone around; I'd even got the recipe and given it to my mother, but it hadn't come out the same. Now I was turning to look at him; he'd put aside his chowder and crackers, too, and was walking to the phone.

While he dialed, I rapidly checked other stations with the remote control. By sheer luck I landed on another, similar report. They were showing pictures of the boat, a beautiful sailboat of red mahogany with black and gold trim. The cameras panned in quickly, skipping across the words, *Wicked Twist*, painted on the stern in gilt-edged black script.

"Did you do that one, Mr. Hornton?" I asked, but he was already on the phone, asking to speak to Mrs. Sawyer at the Rock of the Bay Inn. I pushed my chowder away and looked

back at the TV; they were already on another story.

"No, no, they didn't say Herbie's name on Channel 8, but Jesus, those reporters, they'll get a hold of it somehow. You just tell Emily Sawyer I'll keep her boy here with me today. Yeah, yeah, same to you, Joe." Then he hung up.

Apparently he hadn't been able to reach my mother, had been talking to Joe McSween, the assistant manager of the inn and a local man.

Mr. Hornton came back to his TV tray. We'd set up two on his small front porch to watch his portable color set.

"I'm not afraid of any reporters," I assured him.

"*She*—" all the emphasis was on that word as he thrust a spoon at me "—was an important lady you found."

"Yeah." I picked up my glass of root beer and sank back a little in the wicker chair.

They were doing the weather now. "I guess she was."

I didn't do much the rest of the afternoon. I helped Mr. Hornton with some of the painting, cleaned some brushes, mixed some more paint, helped him tip a small rowboat onto some sawhorses so he could strip it down. That was a whole job: the owner wanted a new coat of paint, a new name,

the works. All for a lousy little rowboat. It was going to be called the *Lemmon Drop*.

"Stupid name," I said. And stupid color, too. We were mixing a bucket of lime-yellow paint.

But the *Wicked Twist Two*, or actually *Wicked Twist*², that was *not* a stupid name for a skiff. Actually quite clever. It seems Cynthia Brant, my dead lady, had been a math teacher before she married rich attorney Steven Brant. Yeah, that was pretty clever, I thought. They'd told more about her—and him—on the radio; we kept it on as we worked in the yard. They still hadn't found it, the *Wicked Twist*², that is.

"Man's name is Hardy Lemmon, and don't you be making fun of my regular, paying customers. This one, this Hardy Lemmon fellow, he gives me work every year, sends his friends over, too. Last year this little boat was the *Lemmon'ade*, and the year before that the *Lemmon'n Lime*. Man's got imagination, I'll tell you that."

"Sure," I grunted, which prompted him to reach out and give me a fake punch to the head. I laughed and ducked away. Even if I didn't have much to do, I was probably

more in his way than any help. At least it kept me busy.

I was worried, you see, but mostly about my mother. Sooner or later we'd hear the phone ring; sooner or later I'd have to explain everything all over again to her. She'd be worried, scared, upset, all for nothing. It hadn't been my fault that Mrs. Cynthia Allan Brant had decided to drown and drift into the inlet with the tide.

"What's the name of his big boat, this Mr. Hardy Lemmon fellow?" I asked as he poured more yellow into his mixture to brighten it up a bit. Last year the boat had been a happy, gaudy sunflower yellow; apparently Mr. Hardy Lemmon was going for a more subdued look this year.

"Lemmon'n Lorraine."

"That's stupid."

"His wife's name is—hell, never mind." He continued to stir the paint. As he did I noticed the drawing I'd done, there on the gravel drive under a can of paint like it was some old piece of newspaper. I picked it up and stared at the picture I'd drawn of the inlet, the two beaches, the two longshore currents meeting, pushing each other out, and when the inlet was emptying, the tides . . .

Except now there were black paint drops all over my sand-

bars and the beach I'd marked "Miller's Side."

"Did you letter *their* boat, the *Wicked Twist*?" I asked the old man.

"No, Jimmy Woodman did, I think, up Boothby Village. I think I recognized his work. He's a good letterer, got a very fine touch." He was still mixing paint. "Now, you gonna help me, boy, or—"

That's when the phone rang up inside the house. I looked at him, not wanting to answer, wanting suddenly for him to do this for me. Sometimes even kids my age will do that, retreat back into little children, ready to let an adult do something for them they don't want to do.

"I'll talk to her, invite her over for some supper if she likes. That way neither of you'll be home."

"Thanks," was all I could think to say. Then I pulled up a crate to sit on and studied my picture some more.

"These are fine clams, Mr. Hornton, you really oughtn't to do this for Herbie and me." That was my mother, respectful, courteous-till-it-hurt, and always full of gratitude. When life knocks you around a lot,

you're grateful for every crumb you get. In fact, this small gesture was just about to overwhelm her: there were tears in her large blue eyes. I knew what she'd do next but unfortunately wasn't quick enough to get out of her way. She was already there, arms around me, kissing the top of my head.

I'd been right about her. When Joe McSween had broken the news to her, that her twelve-year-old son had found Cynthia Brant's body down on Gray Tides Bird Sanctuary and Wildlife Preserve, not *on* the beach, as the television newsmen erroneously reported, but *in* the inlet, stuck on a sandbar at its mouth, well, she'd just fallen apart. You would have thought it was *my* body they found down there. And even though Mr. Hornton had pretty much reassured her on the phone, she couldn't go back to work. McSween, never a very generous sort but not looking for any negative publicity either, had let her leave, and she'd come straight over to Mr. Hornton's house; she'd been in tears most the afternoon. Poor old Mr. Hornton, he hadn't known what to make of it at first, even though he'd known my mother for years.

So he'd put her to work rinsing some steamers he'd picked up from a friend for a lettering

job he'd done. A lot of the locals who had small fishing boats, dinghys, and the like sometimes couldn't afford to pay Mr. Hornton what he got from the richer summer people, so he was always telling them, "Don't worry about it," and "I skin the summer folks well enough to make up for it."

But of course they never did forget about it. All summer long he got "favors." A bucket of clams, which he'd steam, tasted great, or maybe a handful of small quahogs that he'd down raw, with just a dash of lemon or Tabasco sauce. Other times it might be bluefish that he'd barbecue on his little hibachi. Wonderful stuff.

That afternoon it was clams, small, sweet, soft-shelled clams. Dug from somewhere up near the marsh, I bet, because they had a gray color to their shells. They weren't the pure white of clams dug out of sandier shores like you usually see at fish markets.

"Hell, Mrs. Sawyer, Herbie'll do all right. He did all right already," Mr. Hornton said, still trying to convince her my life wasn't in imminent danger. "Called the police and that was that. His name's not been on the TV, and you can thank our local police for *that*."

"Oh, I know," she said, crushing me to her. She was a tiny

woman, but strong. And I felt stupid being held like that, but I didn't move, not yet. Better to let her get it out of her system. "But my Herbie's never even seen a dead body, Mr. Hornton. I can't even imagine how frightening it must have been for him."

"Mom, it was nothing," I tried to insist, but she kept squeezing and squeezing me.

"And if that poor woman was . . . murdered? Well, I hate to say it, but what if she was? And Herbie's seen something he shouldn't have? I think of these things, I do, ever since Mr. McSween told me—"

Mr. Hornton just out and interrupted her. "Now, there you go, you're imagining things, Emily. The lady drowned, terrible as it was, but just drowned, and your son happened to find the body. That's what they said on the TV and—"

Her turn to interrupt him, surprisingly so, too; she was always so well-mannered. "But do they *know* everything yet? About her death? What do those television people know except what the police tell them? It's just like that actress, so many years ago. Out there in California. They say she fell off a boat, but to this day there are a lot of people who have second thoughts . . ." Then her arms dropped limply off me.

"Rich people, out there in the bay in their fancy boats. I see them every day, drinking and partying, and one wonders where *their* children are? Away to some fancy summer camp, I guess. But I see them, they come in for drinks and they meet their friends and then they're out on their boats doing Lord knows what. You know, I love the summer because the rent is free and the work is regular, but I hate it, too. I hate those summer people. They're irresponsible and reckless and look what it's got one of them. Falling off a boat? She must have been drinking, don't you think? Or worse?"

"Mom, Mrs. Brant wasn't a summer person, neither is her husband. She came from somewhere round here; I heard it on the radio, and Mr. Brant is from Boothby, too."

She just stared at me blankly, as though she hadn't heard me. Was she going to cry again? Was she upset because somehow these people she depended upon—these rich and self-centered people who gave her her livelihood—had suddenly hurt, no, had *corrupted* her son? Yes, and that I had seen the other side of that world she existed in, the side she took such pains to keep me from seeing. I'd been so innocent until then, or so she be-

lieved I'd been, until I'd found the body in the inlet.

"My Lord," she said with a sudden deep breath. "I really went off, didn't I? I guess this whole thing has gotten me terribly worked up."

Mr. Hornton's turn to step in again, calm her down. With a very gentle touch around her shoulders, he said, "Why don't you go sit on the porch a while? Watch some TV? Herbie and I'll set the table and get those steamers ready."

Strangely, but with effusive gratitude, my mother nodded her head and agreed.

We ate grand that night, steamers and hot bread, fresh beans from Mr. Hornton's garden slathered over with butter. We had some stuffed quahogs, courtesy of a nice lady down the road, a Mrs. Minnie Drew, and there was even some chowder left over which my mother raved about.

Well, my mother doesn't exactly *rave*, but her compliments were heavy and genuine. She liked chowder. She had a more difficult time with the steamers. Originally from Springfield, Massachusetts, my mother hadn't been raised on seafood like I had been. My father had been a Cape Codder, insisted on fish and shellfish as a

regular part of his diet. Mom had complied, but reluctantly.

"The steamers I see at the inn," she said as she ate her third, then delicately put the shell into a tin plate Mr. Hornton had set on the table for that purpose, "are a little different from these, Mr. Hornton, though these are quite . . . delicious." She wiped dripping butter from her bottom lip and smiled at me. She was calming down.

"Well, how do you mean, Emily?" Mr. Hornton asked politely back. He'd had a dozen or more already, stripping them from their shells, peeling back the long black membrane from what we called the neck, but which I knew—from school—was more accurately called a siphon. Then he dipped the little loose body into the butter and popped it in his mouth whole.

Only way to eat a steamer.

"The shells. Are they a different variety? The ones served at the inn have a very pale white shell. These look the same, but . . ."

"Shell's gray. That tells you where Manny Souza picked 'em up, don't it?" Mr. Hornton grinned. "Down on Gray Tides, I'll bet. Probably early in the morning, when there's a low tide. He digs 'em up before anyone can come along and tell

him he can't." Then he frowned, noticing the silence between my mother and me at mention of Gray Tides. "'Course, Manny got these Friday or Saturday morning; he gave them to me yesterday afternoon. Still fresh, though. They'll keep a while if you keep 'em cold."

I didn't feel like eating for a minute; I just stared at my plate. It was true, what Mr. Hornton said. I often saw Manny Souza down on the sandbars, and between them, but only when low tide came early in the morning. He hadn't been there this morning, else he'd have been the one to run and ring the alarm. Besides, I seldom saw Manny as far down the beach as the inlet, and never on Miller's side. Too much trouble to haul his buckets of clams up the long beach. Too much risk of getting caught, too.

"Shell's gray, Mom, because," I found myself automatically saying, "they're dug out of Gray Tides. That's how it got its name, the sand has a grayish tint to it, I mean if you dig into it a few inches. The whole area was a marsh that got covered up when they dredged Boothby Harbor. Anyhow, the sand is often gray up near a marsh; the organic material in the sand makes it dark, and

sometimes it's old dunes, too, buried there. Dune sand tends to be gray because of the extra hornblende, that's a black mineral in the sand, and . . ." I bit my lip and grabbed another hunk of bread.

"My boy's smart, isn't he?" my mother beamed.

"I learned it in school, Mom. We had a minicourse in ocean science last term." I sighed and reached for the butter. Mr. Hornton used real butter; the man was practically a gourmet.

"Well, wherever they came from, they're delicious." She reached for one more, but she really didn't want it. Good old Mom, she was just being polite.

There wasn't much more about Cynthia Brant's "tragic drowning" on the news that night, except that the Boston stations had picked it up and repeated the facts we'd heard earlier, plus one more interesting one: the skiff had been found. Some kids fishing for flounder off the shallows below the preserve had found it washed up between some rocks. Its little outboard motor had run out of gas.

They had a few quick shots of Attorney Brant leaving his home up in Boothby with members of his family. None of them looked particularly happy, and

no one spoke to any of the reporters hanging around.

My mother watched with me long enough to make sure my name still wasn't being mentioned, then she went off upstairs to check on the "kids" who lived above us. It was strangely quiet up there, for a Sunday evening that is, but she came back to tell me that two of them were working and the other three had gone out to a party.

After making sure I was all right—for the hundredth time that day—she went off to read in her bedroom. Mr. McSween had told her she could have Monday off if she "felt like she had to," but I was a big boy and told her I'd stay with Mr. Hornton or go over to one of my friends if it would make her feel better. She said she'd give it some thought, then nervously went to check the doors and windows for the fourth or fifth time.

I watched some more television, played a video game a friend had lent me, and watched more TV. I scouted around the kitchen, found some Doritos, chocolate ice cream, and a bottle of cream soda. Then I went out to our little porch, propped myself up on an old couch, and watched Arsenio Hall on some awards show while I dipped chips in choco-

late ice cream. Best dip there is.

But even that bored me after a while, and I found myself flipping channels—local channels—looking for stories about Cynthia Brant. I wanted to know *the whole story*. If she had fallen off the skiff, the *Wicked Twist*², and how and why and when. I found one station where a reporter was interviewing a couple who supposedly had their boat moored fairly close to the *Wicked Twist*. They both claimed to have heard loud shouts and a lot of arguing around seven o'clock last night. Police were investigating their story, according to the reporter.

I thought about that for a minute. She and her husband had been arguing? Had they been drinking, too, like my mother believed all rich people did? But what about the condition of the body? There'd been no mention about it. Had there been marks or bruises? I hadn't seen any, but I hadn't seen all of her.

And what about the time of death? The police wouldn't say, they didn't have "enough information yet," according to the reporter on another station who was trying to pry answers out of the police chief, finally back from Martha's Vineyard.

"No, I'm sorry I can't help you folks out there," good old Chief Harrington, all five foot two of him, was saying to a pair of persistent reporters. "But we'll be issuing a statement soon—very soon. Right now we're treating this as an accidental death, death by drowning. Yes, we did recover the skiff and..."

And what time had she died? At what time so that high tide would wash her into the inlet and deposit her like a lifeless doll on that strange little sandbar?

But sometimes news people, for all their perseverance, can't get the detailed information that they—or I—wanted. I'd need to buy a newspaper, first thing tomorrow morning. And keep the TV on, and the radio—several radios—all set to different stations.

So I ate and flipped channels and stumbled by mistake on a local channel, a Cape station out of Hyannis.

The house had cable TV hooked up to it, but we only got the "basic," the stuff you usually got for free. We were there for only a few months, so my mother never bothered to get any of the good stations, like MTV or HBO, or even the Disney Channel. Besides, we could never afford it. But we did get Hyannis-One, on Channel 61,

and right there on Channel 61 was my marsh and both sides of the inlet, Tides side to the north, Miller's side and Miller's shack as the camera swept toward the south. Long after all the big-city reporters had come and gone, a dinky little outfit out of Hyannis was doing a story on Cynthia Brant.

"... and this is the beach the body was discovered on, by a local youth, early this morning ..."

A shot of the sandbar but no body. The tides had come and gone and wiped it clean, smooth, flat. I remembered my drawing; I'd left it at Mr. Horton's house.

"... It was only a mile farther down this coast ..." The speaker, a pale young woman with strawberry-red hair that was blowing in all directions, gestured past the shack and down the shoreline. There was a slow, mistlike fog rolling in; this must have been taped late that afternoon. "... that the skiff, *Wicked Twist Two*, was found by some children up against the rocks. It is now believed," she was walking across the small patch of dunes toward Old Man Miller's shack, "that shortly after Mrs. Brant and her husband Steven Brant returned to their yacht from digging clams along this beach they had a fight aboard their

boat." A dramatic turn to the fogswept coast, a profound look on the woman's face.

But I was stuck, barely listening as she mentioned the fact that the fight had been overheard by a couple on a nearby boat. Barely hearing as she went on to mention the police theory that Cynthia Brant had then left the yacht in the skiff with the intention of returning to her home in Boothby Village.

No, I was stuck, the Dorito in my hand turning to a brown, chocolaty slop. Cynthia Brant and her husband had been clamming? Along the Tides?

I nearly leaped off the couch. If they had been clamming, on Saturday afternoon ... my head began to do quick, careful calculations. I could look for my tide chart, but usually I figured tides in my head.

High tide. Twelve fifty A.M. The tide that carried her in, then or possibly earlier. The police had to have figured *that* by now. So when had she and her husband been "clamming"? Low tide on Saturday afternoon—or evening—had been about six thirty-eight. Still light at that time. But foggy. Too foggy for clamming? No, they'd probably been digging clams late in the afternoon. Full moon low tide, certainly low enough for clamming. Yes,

they'd been out there clamming late in the afternoon. It explained her clothes.

Old clothes. A rope belt. Worn sneakers. The costume of the Cape Cod clammer. Her fingers had been bare—most women took off all the jewelry they wore when they went digging for clams. Except maybe a wedding ring.

"Steven Brant had admitted to a 'disagreement . . .'"

But all I could see was two people digging for clams. And the tide rushing out. The rip current, made by two longshore currents that met, pushing each other away from shore. And then with the tide going out . . .

I thought of Cherry Morton.

"I passed the time of day with them." Old Man Miller, only a little unsteady on his feet, was there on the TV, talking to the redhaired reporter. "We had a few beers, and they took some clamming gear. He's a good boy, that Stevie, even if'n his last name is Brant. I used to see him up and down this beach as a kid, chubbing, dragging for crabs, catching eels. Hell—" a short, gruff laugh—"kid was a marvel at catching eels, though what the hell for, I used to ask. Nobody I knows eats eel round here."

I put aside my mushy chips, my melted ice cream, and

moved nearer the television. The reporter was asking him questions.

The old man was scratching his head. "Gone over this a dozen times with the police, but I think they were out there about five, maybe six o'clock? They took a basket and a couple of diggers and went off. I did tell them the Tides side was showing finer clams. It's all a preserve, you know, but him being Stevie Brant, well, hell, I'm going to tell him *he* can't dig here?" Another gruff laugh.

I shut my eyes, raced back to earlier this morning. Five fifteen? Yes, and how I ran, half-falling up the bank to Jedediah Miller's shack, to tell him, to have him call the police. What had *he* done?

He'd made a choking sound, had already been up, was moving around his tiny bathroom. Then he came out and dived for a bottle of whisky sitting there on the counter. I hadn't even told him whether the body had been a man's or a woman's. Just: "Mr. Miller?" I had hardly banged on his flimsy screened door, just burst right in. "I think you should call the police, sir. I just found a dead body down in the inlet."

That's when he had dived for the bottle. Jack Daniel's.

Jack Daniel's. Not cheap stuff. Half empty bottle. Damn!

I looked back at the TV as the reporter, looking very remorseful, moved away from the still unsteady Jedadiah Miller. "Police are still investigating this tragic incident. It is a story filled with ironies, for this was the beach Steven Brant played along as a child. Now it has become the final resting place of . . ."

Garbage now. Besides, I had to do some serious thinking.

And talking. I ran into the living room and picked up the phone.

“It isn't just anyone I'd do this for, Herbie, but you told the night duty officer you had something important to tell me, something that couldn't wait till morning.” He was trying to be severe, but a smile was unfolding across Sergeant Valari's round, goodnatured face as he came into the house.

“My mother's asleep, sir,” I said softly. “Can we talk out on the porch?”

“Well, why the hell not, Herbie?” he answered in the same tone. “Not every day I get to talk police business with a budding twelve-year-old detective.” Then he paused and eyed me warily. “That's not all this is, is it? You're not dragging me

up here on some wild goose chase?”

“I'd never bother you, sir, if I didn't think it was important, or if it could wait. And I don't think it can.”

He grunted some kind of agreement, and we went out onto the porch. I carefully shut the door, put on a light, turned off the TV, and started.

But to each suggestion I made, he shot me down:

“They *were* arguing, Herbie. We found two boats, close by, heard them, right around seven o'clock. That's *after* they left Gray Tides and got back to their boat.”

And: “Why didn't she change her clothes? Hell, Herbie, I can't explain everything, and neither do I have to. She was drinking. He was drinking. Jedadiah Miller can attest to the fact that they all were drinking. That probably didn't end when they got back to their boat. I don't say it's right, to drink and be out on a boat. In fact, it's a damned stupid thing to do. But they did. She had a blood alcohol level of 0.12, and that I can tell you because it'll be in the papers tomorrow. I hate to think you dragged me way up here . . .” He shook his head. “You told Officer O'Brien you'd found some new evidence up here, but I don't see any signs of it, Herbie. I hate to tell

you, but you've disappointed me, boy."

"The Jack Daniel's?" I asked frantically. I was reaching for straws, and he knew. I was also being made to look like a fool, and we both knew it.

"Hell, I don't know where Jed got *that*. Maybe the Brants did bring it for him, but if they did, so what? It's more likely Jed went down to the nearest liquor store and bought it for himself."

"They got him drunk, sir. No. *Steven Brant* got him drunk; he liquored him up and waited for him to go to sleep. That's what Old Man Miller always does when he gets drunk—he sleeps. I know it. And Steven Brant would know it, too."

"How would Steven Brant—"

"It was on the news tonight. Channel 61, the redhaired—"

"Oh, that snoopy, know-it-all reporter? She was out harassing Jed this afternoon—"

I interrupted again, rude as it was. "She said Steven Brant knew the whole area, that he'd played there as a kid. Mr. Miller even said so on TV. Makes sense, his grandmother owned all of the Tides side. So he knew about Jed, do you see?"

He frowned at me but suddenly had no quick rebuttal. That was when I realized this man, this smart cop, was play-

ing a game with me, a game of deriding every single thing I said, just to find out what I knew, what I might have to share with him.

It scared me suddenly; of course no cop would come out in the middle of the night to talk to a twelve-year-old kid, not if Cynthia Brant had died of accidental drowning. Of course not. They were investigating this as something else.

They... the police... him. Accidental drowning they call it, the press, too. Accidental drowning until you have enough facts or evidence to call it something else.

"I don't know what to say. But you're right about that. And we had a tide analysis done, currents and tides and so on. Had a Woods Hole expert come down to the station, though I could have read everything right off a tide chart if I wanted to. Anyhow, he explained to me about rip tides and all that. But the fact is, a tide or current did carry her body in—her *dead* body. She had a fight with her husband, got mad, and jumped in the dinghy to go back to shore. The last he saw of her was her in the dinghy moving off in the fog towards shore. She'd been drinking; he feels terrible now for letting her go. That was some time after seven, which

more or less confirms what the coroner thinks: She'd been dead between ten and twelve hours when you found her."

"You think she died around seven o'clock—last night?"

"Steven Brant says he last saw her at about seven fifteen, but he's not positive of the time. Went below deck to watch *Evening Magazine*, which comes on at seven thirty, right after. Fell asleep and stayed there the rest of the night."

"I think she died closer to six, sir."

"Herbie, what I'm telling you I shouldn't, but it will be in the papers and . . ." He sat back heavily in the wicker chair and started shuffling for a pack of cigarettes.

"My mother doesn't like people to smoke in the house, sir."

"Listen, Herbie—" A sudden lunge forward, as though he'd liked to have lunged for my neck. He slapped both hands down on his knees instead. "Everything fits, just like he says it happened. That's all I can tell you. The poor lady, drunk, in the fog, she lost her balance somehow, fell overboard and . . ."

"She died around six. I know she did. She died in the rip current, just like Cherry Morton back in—"

"Sixty-two? That story still going around?" He gave a hol-

low-sounding laugh. "Herbie Sawyer, I do admire your persistence. But, boy, if you've got nothing else to offer me . . ." He began to stand.

"Why did you come out here, sir?" I looked up at him, trying not to appear too desperate. "I mean, if you didn't have doubts of your own?"

"Oh, hell, Herbie, I always have doubts. And you were right about Cynthia Brant. I knew her. She went to school with me up in Sandwich, except she was three years younger than me." He shoved the package of cigarettes back in his pocket.

"How'd she die? Do you know? Were there bruises? Did he beat her up?"

He just stared down at me.

"Because he didn't, did he? She just clean drowned—no rocks out there to bang around against, at the mouth of the inlet, I mean. She just drowned. She never went back to the *Wicked Twist* with her husband. He let her drown, then he went back alone and staged a fight, real loud, cursing, whatever those people heard. Then he turned on the outboard motor on the little boat and just set it off—to the south—in the fog. Made it look like she took off on him."

He was still staring at me, and I knew the look in his eyes.

even though it was fairly dim out there on that porch.

"Do you know, sir, on the wire baskets Old Man Miller has, well, he attaches a piece of line to them, old fishing line, string, anything, and to the end of that he puts a piece of old buoy or wood. Sometimes the buoys are Styrofoam. It's to mark the basket in case you set it down where the water's fairly deep. 'Course you wouldn't do that if you were clamming, but for scalloping, later in the fall, you would need to mark your basket; you'd be out in deeper water, you see."

"What are you getting at, Herbie?"

"She . . . the body, I mean, Mrs. Brant . . . she had something white stuck to one of her nails. She also had dirt deep under them where being in the water hadn't cleaned 'em yet. That's not so strange, I guess. You might be so mad you'd not bother to clean your hands, but she had nice hands—I mean, long nails, painted. Yeah, you might be so mad you wouldn't change your clothes or clean up your hands, but would a lady leave Styrofoam stuck to her nails?"

"How did you know that's what it was?" This was his most vicious moment yet, if the man could be called vicious. He just had this sound to his voice,

this sudden anger, but it wasn't directed at me. He thought someone had talked . . . too much.

"Did they mention that on that Hyannis news show? Damn, wait till I get ahold of Carleton—"

"No, sir," I said quickly. "No one told me. I saw it. And I think I know how it all happened. She was struggling to get clear of the current. She was probably carrying the basket, or trying to carry it across the mouth of the inlet, about six last night. I think she was on Miller's side, and her husband, he was probably over on the Tides. The tide was low but still going out. She could have been waist-deep in water and thought nothing of it . . . at first."

And I thought of Cherry Morton, a swimmer, a man going into training to be a navy diver, a frogman. It had killed him, and deposited his body *on the next high tide* up in the marsh. "He might even have been in the dinghy, calling her over—and she walked right across the inlet and into the current that sucked her out. Could she swim, sir?"

He was answering in spite of himself. "Not very well."

"And she was drinking, too. I think if you drag at the mouth of the inlet, side to side and out

to about a hundred, maybe a hundred and fifty, feet, you'll find Old Man Miller's clam basket . . . and maybe some of the clams she dug, too."

"Hell, you're wrong, Herbie. You're dead wrong." He sat back on the edge of the chair. "I thought of all that, too. Don't you think I thought of that? She got her hand caught, or tried to grab onto a Styrofoam float, whatever, but . . . hell, Herbie, we went down into the galley of the *Wicked Twist* and looked into the refrigerator there, and what do you think we found?" A pause, to let it sink in. "A basket of clams, Herbie, a big wire basket of clams."

"Maybe they had two baskets, sir."

"No, Jed Miller says they borrowed only one."

"Maybe the Brants had one of their own."

"Herbie . . ."

"Maybe they took a second basket when Jed was sleeping. You do see why Steven Brant wanted him to be sleeping? So he wouldn't hear when Cynthia started to cry out." I felt sick suddenly. My brilliant line of reasoning had been shot down, and with such brutal and inarguable simplicity.

I thought I'd known. Thought I could explain all of it: why Jed Miller had to be gotten drunk;

why there was a glob of sea spit under her nail, which turned out to be Styrofoam; why she hadn't changed her clothes, filed and cleaned her nails; and why the same forces that had carried her out and drowned her had brought her back.

Back to nearly the very same spot where she had died.

He looked at the floor, big hands clenched together. "Jed said it was one of his, the basket on the *Wicked Twist*. We let the bastard keep his clams." He regretted saying that, looked quickly off the porch in the direction of the road. "So it's as he said: she went off mad, she fell off the boat in the fog, and she drowned. That's all it is. It was foggy, and she was not a good swimmer. That's all."

"Sir?"

He turned slowly to look back down at me. I could hear my mother moving around inside now, her soft, almost plaintive, "Herbie?"

I ignored her. "What color were those clams?"

He frowned, then answered roughly. "What the hell color do you think they were? Damn it, Herbie, they were white, of course."

"Of course, but if they came from Tides Preserve they should be gray." I could feel my heart beating in my throat. Would this man know the dif-

ference? Did he call all clams white, without thinking? "And he told you those were the clams he got from the preserve?"

He was frowning, but thinking, too. My mother came to the door timidly, fearfully, in her pink housecoat.

"He bought those clams, the ones you saw, sir. I'm sure of it. He had to. Because when you got clamming, you never know."

"You never know?"

"You never know if you're going to get any. It's almost always a hit-or-miss deal, sir. But Steven Brant, he *had* to have some, in case he and his wife didn't get any. So you'll either find a basket of white clams, which he got or bought somewhere else, or you'll find a mixture of white *and* gray-tinted clams, which would be the ones he bought and the ones he and his wife dug. You see, he had to have *some* clams in his refrigerator . . . for *you* to see."

"And if they're all gray?"

"He still could have killed her, but you'll have to find some other way to prove it."

"Herbie?" My mother's voice was an anguished whisper.

"Just make sure he admits *those* are the ones he and his wife dug. Get him to admit that, sir."

"Christ—" He looked off as my mother came onto the porch.

"It'd be a guaranteed drowning, sir. No marks, no bruises. He didn't have to hold her head under or hit her, knock her out. Nothing. The current would do it all for him."

"Jesus H. Christ," he muttered again.

There was no new information on Cynthia Brant's drowning for the next two days. The police were holding off from their "official statement" until Wednesday. So until then we heard the same story.

Except that someone did get hold of my name, and reporters did come to our house. I avoided them, though: out the back door as they came in the front. My mother handled them fairly well, in her vague, unfocused way. They'd get impatient and leave.

One paper did try a different angle, focusing on the "tragic irony" of it all, how the Brants had been clamming on the very beach where her body was later found. Another paper made mention of the tides and currents—complete with diagrams. The Woods Hole expert was quoted. The story appeared by way of explaining how the

body got carried into the inlet, not how she died.

But though Woods Hole experts are fine, no one knows an area like a person who lives in it does. I knew the area. So did Steven Brant. He knew that tide was powerful—he'd probably heard the story of Cherry Morton more times than he could count. He knew if anyone were trying to swim—or walk—across the mouth of the inlet as the tide was going out . . . well, unless you knew how to get out, you just sucked water and sank. Cynthia Brant hadn't known the area. She'd been drinking. And carrying clams. It was foggy, and the only person who might have helped her was lying dead drunk up in his shack.

She probably trusted her husband, too.

So when Sergeant Valari called me Wednesday morning to tell me three things, then made me swear not to tell anyone—the full story was breaking at noontime—I didn't. Not Mom. Not Mr. Hornton. No one.

This is what the sergeant told me:

One: Steven Brant, under questioning, did admit to giving Jedadiah Miller the bottle of Jack Daniel's for "old times' sake" and to thank him for the use of his clamming gear. But he insisted he took one basket—and only one—and it was the one found aboard the *Wicked Twist*.

Two: The police did drag the area at the mouth of the inlet. And they found another wire basket which Jedadiah also identified as his, but he couldn't explain how it had gotten there, about ninety feet beyond the mouth of the inlet.

And three: The police went back to the galley of the *Wicked Twist* one more time. The clams were still there, but by this time the whole ship was being held, pending a further investigation and the results of an inquest. Steven Brant insisted the clams in the basket were the ones he and his wife had dug . . . all of them, and couldn't understand the fuss everyone was making over them.

That's probably when Sergeant Valari read him his rights. I like to think it was. Because every clam in that wire basket was white, you see.

White as sea foam.

UNSOLVED

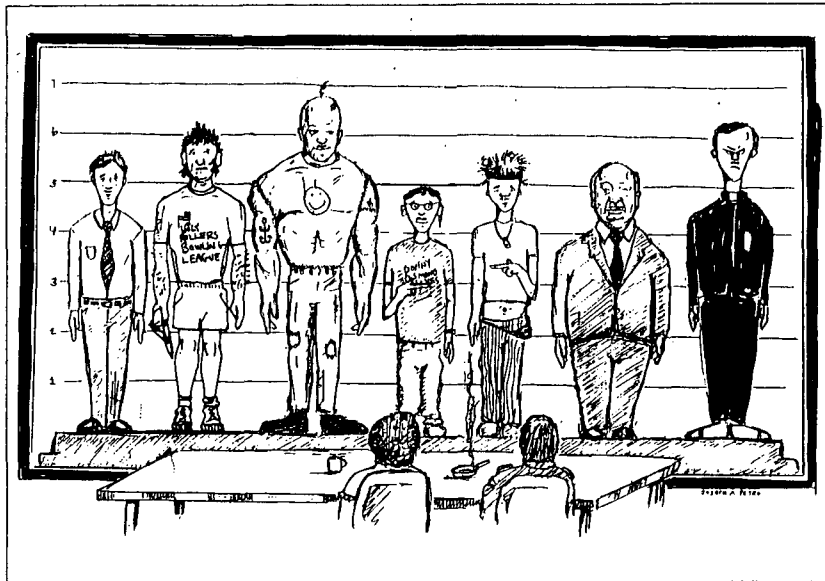
by
Guy Savant

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the November issue.

A mere four hours ago, the Websterville National Bank was robbed. Shown here are the seven men police picked up shortly after the bank robbery, one of whom is the culprit.

Seven tellers witnessed the robbery. Below are two statements from each teller, one of whom is completely right, two of whom are completely wrong, and four of whom are right in one statement and wrong in the other. From these statements and clues provided in the illustration, can you finger the guilty man?



- Sue: ° 1. Alex is completely wrong.
 2. The bank robber wore a tie.
- Candice: 1. Norman is completely wrong.
 2. The bank robber wore short pants.
- Norman: 1. The bank robber had writing or a picture on his T-shirt.
 2. Sue is completely wrong.
- Gordon: 1. The bank robber was dressed all in black.
 2. Cheryl is completely right.
- Libby: 1. The bank robber was over five feet tall.
 2. Gordon is completely wrong.
- Cheryl: 1. The bank robber had a tattoo.
 2. Candice is half right.
- Alex: 1. The bank robber wore glasses.
 2. Libby is half right.

See page 149 for the solution to the September puzzle.

FICTION

No Place Like Home

by K. D. Wentworth



Illustration by Sallie Gregory

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When I pushed the door of the storm cellar open, I could still hear the tornado's freight-train roar as it faded away to the east.

"Well, would you look at that?" Anna said over my shoulder.

A bunch of the damndest little houses had appeared right in the middle of my best-yielding field of green beans.

I cursed under my breath. It was a typical tornado trick—damn twisters was always stealing a man's livestock or blasting his house to splinters, then leaving behind damn-fool stuff like straws poked through telephone poles.

I sent Anna back up to the house, got a flashlight, and went out to the field, squishing down the muddy rows, knee-deep in tattered bean bushes. The rain had slowed to a faint drizzle, and the air had a chilly, after-storm bite, too cold for June. Lightning flickered overhead, and the hairs on the back of my neck did a little hula-dance. I stopped in front of a bizarre round house with double chimneys. The roof came up only as high as my nose. "Any-one in there?"

Thunder rumbled in the distance. I bent over and banged on the door with the flashlight. Something rustled inside, like

mice digging in a haystack. The door creaked outwards. Two pairs of frightened eyes blinked at me.

"Come on out of there," I stepped back. "I ain't gonna hurt you."

A man and a woman edged through the door, each no bigger than a six-year-old, clinging to each other with tiny hands. Both of them were dressed in blue from head to toe.

"Hello," the little man said in a squeaky mouse-voice. "Are you by any chance a Quadling?"

"Nope," I said.

He squeezed the woman's hand. "Are then you a Winkie or a Gillikin?"

"Hell, no." I moved my feet to keep from sinking any deeper in the mud. "This here's Payne County, Kansas, not Jap-an."

"Gambi..." The tiny man turned to the woman. "I don't think we're in—"

"No, Melo, we're not." Her voice was as sweet as little bells.

I scratched my head. "You two run off from a circus or something?"

"Circus?" She smiled at me, then turned to the other houses. "Come out!" she cried. "It's all right."

Eleven other miniature doors opened. A crowd of tiny, per-

fectly formed people tiptoed out, each dressed in an outrageous getup as blue as a cloudless sky in the middle of August.

"He's not a Quadling or a Winkie or even a Gillikin!" the woman called. "We're free!"

They laughed and clapped their hands, and my skin took to crawling as all them little people pressed right up against me. One fella swept off a pointy hat with bells hung around the brim and bowed. "We beg your pardon, most noble sir, for landing in your vast and glorious garden, but once the great wind swept us away, we had no control."

"Well, that's all well and good, but look at my crop." I pushed the prying little hands off my shirt and glanced over their runty heads at my ruined bean plants. "Between these houses and the mud, I'll never get my beans in before they rot."

The little bells jingled as the man replaced the pointy hat on his head. "We would be more than glad to do whatever we can to repay your losses."

"Yes, yes!" The midgets crowded in again. "We can help! Let us help!"

"All right, all right!" I stumbled back, unnerved by the sound of so many squeaky voices and the whispery touch

of all them teeny fingers. "There's some bushel baskets down in the barn. I'll be down at sunrise, and I guess you might as well help me salvage what's left."

Shivering, I traipsed back to the house, my feet slipping in the cold muck. I could hear their excited voices chittering behind me, and by the time I reached the gate, damned if they wasn't singing like a chorus of baby angels.

I shook my head and went to break the news to Anna that we had company—of a sort.

"Virgil, wake up!"

A steel elbow jabbed me in the ribs.

"Virgil, you have to get up and find out what that is."

I groaned. "For heaven's sake, woman, quit poking me." I threw the quilt back and listened; it was the damn singing again, the notes so high and quavery they set my teeth to aching. I sat up. "It's them midgets. You know, the ones I told you about last night."

Anna pulled the covers up to her chin. "But the rooster hasn't even crowed yet."

I yanked on my overalls and felt around for my shirt. "They got some nerve, tearing up my field, then caterwauling like that before dawn. I'm gonna

call the sheriff out like I should've done last night."

"Well, I don't like having strangers on the place." Her eyes followed me around the bedroom as I tried to find my boots, then finally remembered I'd left them out on the porch, caked with mud.

I could still hear them singing as I walked through the house, all happy and excited, as though they'd just gotten a present. "I'll give you something," I said under my breath as I pushed open the screen door. "I'll give each and every one of you a boot in the—"

"Good morning! Good morning!" a chorus of cricket-voices chirped as I stood there in my stocking feet.

"What's so blasted—"

At the bottom of the steps, a tiny lady dressed in a huge puffed skirt held up my boots, the mud cleaned off and polished to a sheen that reflected the rising red-orange sun.

I cleared my throat. "What are y'all doing up here? I thought you was gonna help me pick beans this morning."

"Oh, we did! We did!" They clapped their tiny hands. "But we've already picked them all, so we want something else to do."

"Yeah, right." I put my hands on my hips. "You picked

twenty acres of beans before sunup."

One little round fellow with hair combed into a sissy curl-cue in the middle of his forehead stepped forward with a shamed look on his face. "Well..." He fiddled with a row of shiny brass buttons on his jacket. "... We did oversleep a bit, but if you'll just say what to do next, we'll get on with it."

"The barn!" Anna hissed at me from behind the screen door. "Tell them to clean out the barn!"

I turned around. "But, Anna—"

"You can call the sheriff after they clean out the barn," Anna said.

"Oh, all right." I turned back around, but every one of the little rascals had already lit out. "So much for that," I told Anna. "They heard you and ran away."

"Well, get in here and eat your breakfast then."

I sighed. Some days just naturally start out worse than others.

After coffee, grits, and gravy, I went to check on the beans, expecting to see them still hanging on the bushes. Instead, I found a pile of picked green beans as high as one of them little round houses and

every one of my bushel baskets filled to the brim.

I pushed back my hat to scratch my head, then caught the tang of fresh paint in the morning air.

"Come and see!" called a chorus of tinny voices. "Do you like it? Do you like it?"

I whirled around and saw a swarm of midget painters dangling down the side of my barn on ropes, slapping the last few brushfuls of blue paint in place. "Where in the hell did you get that paint?" My eyes were bugging out. "And who told you you could paint my barn anyway?"

"Gambi had some paint in her house." A trio of fat-cheeked little women joined hands and skipped around me like I was a damned maypole. "Yes, yes, Gambi!" They started a song that screeched up into dog-whistle range.

I jammed my hands over my ears. "Stop it!"

Their mouths dropped open like a row of mailbox doors.

"You get your stuff and go back where you come from!" I sneaked another look at the robin's-egg-blue paint drying on my barn and winced. If anyone saw that before I got it painted back a proper red, I would be the laughingstock of Payne County. "Every one of you, right now, git!"

Anna walked up behind me. "Virgil, you let these nice folks be!"

I turned around. "But—"

"No buts," she said. "Just look how much help they've been already." She patted a paint-splattered midget on the head.

I picked the runt up and set him out of my way. "Stay out of this, Anna."

"Don't you folks pay him no mind." Anna crossed her arms. "Y'all done real nice with the barn, so come on up to the house and eat some grits."

The painters dropped their brushes, the women all clapped their hands, and the whole bunch ran lickety-split into the house. I stared after them for a moment, then turned back to the barn and touched the paint; damned if it wasn't already dry. A gleeful song wafted out the kitchen window. I put my hands over my ears and hoped they choked on those grits.

"I don't care what you say, they're adorable. I want them to stay." Anna rinsed the last dish and set it in the drainer. Back in the bedroom I could hear more singing as the circus runaways made our bed.

"But, Anna . . ." I kept my voice down; the little buggers had hearing like foxes. "They're not—normal."

"Well, they are kinda short," she said as she folded the dish towel. "But you have to admit they can sure pick beans."

"Only because they're so dad-gummed close to the ground to begin with." I looked over my shoulder, then leaned closer. "Probably due to inbreeding—disgusting, if you ask me."

"I'm sure I don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about." Anna's brown eyes gave me a long hard look.

I reached for the black phone on the wall, dialed, heard it ringing on the other end.

"Sheriff's office."

"Addie," I said, "this is Virgil. Let me speak to Dave."

"He's out on a call, Virgil," his secretary answered. "You want me to give him a message?"

"Yeah." I fingered the unshaved whiskers on my chin. "Tell him I've been invaded by a whole passel of circus midgets out here."

"Wetbacks?"

"Don't rightly know, Addie." I glanced at the clock; half past nine. "How long do you figure he'll be?"

"Oh, no more than a few hours." She sighed. "They had some damage over on the other side of Medford where the twister touched down last

night. I reckon he'll be out as soon he finishes his report."

"Thanks, Addie." I hung up the phone.

By twelve noon, the midgets had painted the entire house blue as a torch singer's song, along with my old truck and every splintery fence post on the place. Even though I was watching the whole time, I couldn't tell how they did it. One minute, there was your house, a nice weathered gray, just like it oughta be, and then there it was, bluer than all get-out, and all I ever saw was the tail-end of a midget or two as they scurried on to the next job.

And then there was Anna. Danged if them circus people hadn't made her some blue shoes with curled-up toes and little bells hanging on the ends. It was enough to turn a decent man's stomach.

I was loading up my old shotgun when the sheriff's battered black-and-white crunched up my driveway. He opened the door and lurched out, looking half-drunk from lack of sleep. "Hear you got a speck of trouble out this way, Virgil."

"Yeah, Dave." I looked back at my blue house. "That dang twister dumped a whole load of midget houses in my bean field last night, and I ain't had a minute's peace since."

"God, I hate twisters!" Dave spit a yellow-brown stream into the grass through the gap in his front teeth. "Well, where are they?"

I listened for a second. A faint chirpy chorus was coming from behind the barn. I nodded. "That's them. Come on."

On the way, I noticed that sometime that morning each strand of barbed wire fence had been decorated with a blue polka dot bow.

Dave scratched his head. "Nice fence."

I fished another shell out of my pocket and loaded the other barrel of the shotgun. We found them in the corral with some calves I was fattening for market, tying ribbons around their necks and painting their hooves blue.

I brought the shotgun up dead-level with their little pointy hats. "Get away from them calves."

Dave stepped forward and pushed the muzzle aside. "Now, don't get carried away here, Virgil." He flashed his badge at the gaping midgets. "Just exactly what do y'all think you're doing? This here is private property."

The shortest woman pushed back her blue lace sunbonnet. "I'm sorry, your honor. We were just having a word with these nice cows."

Dave winked at me. "Pretty fancy stock you're running these days, Virgil."

"Get your runty little bodies out of that corral!" I jerked open the gate. "Right now!"

"We didn't mean any harm." A young fella in god-awful blue striped stockings and short pants pushed his way to the front. "We only asked them if—"

"Don't be ridiculous," I said. "Cows can't talk."

"Can't talk? Can't talk?" they squeaked. "Why not?"

"And—" I picked the shotgun up again—"while I've got your attention, the next one who paints anything blue around here will be picking pieces of himself out of the landscape for the next two weeks."

"No more blue?" They all stared at me. "Ever?"

I eased back the trigger. "Never!"

"Now . . ." Dave took a notebook out of his pocket. "Which circus did y'all come from anyway?"

"Circus?"

"You know—" Dave squinted up his eyes. "Where they got lions and tigers and magicians and such."

"Lions—and tigers?" The striped-socks guy stroked his goatee. "And magicians? He means—"

The sunbonnet-lady snatched off her hat and stuffed it up against his face.

"It doesn't matter," she said sweetly, "because the big wind blew us across the Great Desert, and we can't go back."

Anna appeared on the porch and banged a spoon against the bottom of a frying pan. "Soup's on! Come and get it!"

"Come and get it! Come and get it!" the little people shrieked and took off like a bunch of coyotes headed for the hen house.

I turned to Dave. "Well?"

He pulled off his hat and scratched his head. "This don't sound like no trespassing case I ever heard tell of. It's more like one of them refugee kind of things—you know, displaced persons."

"You're kidding."

He sighed. "After I check out those little houses, I'll talk to the folks down at county." He settled his hat back firmly on his head. "I'll call you later and let you know what they say."

"Yeah." My fingers caressed the wooden stock of my shotgun. "You do that." I watched him lumber across my former best bean field while I tried to remember just when elections were coming up again. Behind me I seemed to hear voices, funny low throaty ones, real strong on the "ooh" sounds.

"Just whoooo does he think heee's kidding?" one said, and another answered, "Nooo one!"

I whirled around, but all I saw was them silly wall-eyed calves, their necks duded-up in blue satin ribbons, chewing their cud's and watching me through the fence.

Virgil, I said to myself, here it's only noon, and you've already been out in the sun too long.

The news from town was bad, of course.

"I'm afraid the folks down at county don't know what to do about them midgets of yours, Virgil."

My fingers tightened on the phone. "They ain't *my* midgets."

"I called Topeka, though, and someone from immy-gration's supposed to come out tomorrow. Just sit tight until then."

"Yeah, right." I hung up. Sit tight—that was easy for him to say. I picked up my hat, then froze. The damn thing *rang* like a grocery store door.

"Isn't that sweet?" Anna took the hat and placed it on my head. "They fixed up your hat." She flicked one of the little bells with her finger.

I snatched the hat off. "I guess there's some as would call it that."

"Now, Virgil, they was just trying to be thoughtful."

"Sure." I stuffed the hat in the trash. "Where are the little varmints anyway?"

"They're watching *Divorce Court*." She followed me to the door. "Now, you let the poor things be. They've already picked your bean fields clean and painted pretty near the whole place. They deserve some time off."

A roomful of small faces looked up as I stormed through the door. "Oh, great and powerful wizard!" They got to their feet and bowed.

"Out!" I pointed at the front door. "I want each and every one of you runts out of my house."

The one with a fire engine red curl right on top of his head pulled at my arm. "But what about the crystal ball in this box? Shouldn't we attend it and record its prophecies?"

"Never mind that." I shook him loose, disgusted at the touch of them teeny fingers. "Go home!"

"But we can't go home!" Striped-stockings' mouth dropped open. "The witch would—"

A dozen dollsized hands clamped over his mouth.

I stared at their suddenly colorless faces. "What about the witch?"

"Never mind." Anna came in and opened the front door. "Y'all run along. I'll be down later with some treats."

"You most certainly will not," I said as they trooped out.

"That's a wizard for you," said one stout man with a blue flowered vest. "Terrible tempers, one and all."

"I am not a wizard!" I yelled at their backs. I could tell, though, right in the pit of my stomach that they wasn't listening. I turned to Anna. "What was all that about?"

"Oh, they said something about a spot of trouble with one of the local bigshots back where they come from."

"Well, there ain't no such thing as witches or wizards."

"Of course not, dear." Winking a blue eye, Anna patted my cheek and went back into the kitchen.

I stared after her, my stomach doing flip-flops. Since the day I'd first met her, Anna had always had *brown* eyes.

Dave was back by ten the next morning with the immigration lady. As he was getting out of his black-and-white, his foot hesitated above the driveway. "What's this?"

I dug my hands into my pockets. "I told them they couldn't paint nothing else blue."

He whistled. "So they painted the gravel yellow."

"Yeah." I crossed my arms and leaned up against the car. "They swear it's all the rage back where they come from."

"And just where is that?" the immy-gration lady asked as she got out of the car.

"Virgil Wilburn," Dave said hastily, "I want you to meet Ethel Pinkerton, down all the way from Topeka Immy-gration."

She had a closed-up look about her mouth and nose and a tight little bun of gray-streaked brown hair on top of her head. Her navy blue suit fit her top-heavy figure like a sack. I wiped my hand off on my overalls, then stuck it out as she struggled toward me across the gravel on a pair of high heels. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Pinkerton."

"That's Ms. Pinkerton." Her tone could have eaten a hole in a sheet of iron at ten paces.

I shoved my hand back into my pocket.

"Exactly what is the country of origin for these so-called refugees?" she asked.

"They won't say, at least not to me." I glanced back at the house. "You might be able to get more out of them."

"Very well." She wrestled a black briefcase out of the car.

"Let's get on with the interview."

"They're in the house, right now, watching a rerun of *Gomer Pyle*." I opened the gate for her. "Don't none of them have a lick of taste when it comes to TV."

Before we could walk up the porch steps, the screen door banged open and a herd of screaming little people rushed out of the front parlor. Ms. Pinkerton pushed her tortoiseshell glasses up on her nose and stared after them as they beat it back to their houses in the field.

Anna came to the door. "Did you see that? One minute we was all watching Gomer do fifty pushups in the mud, then the picture jumps and this real ugly woman dressed in black comes on. 'I'll get you, my pretties,' she says. 'I'll get you and your little cows, too!' Then they all took to screaming 'witch' and lit out."

"Guess you'll have to go down to the field," I said. "You want me to show you the way?"

"No, thank you." The immy-gration lady's mouth flattened into a hard, straight line. "Just point me in the right direction."

"Out yonder," Dave said, "in the bean field."

She took a firm grip on her briefcase and started toward

the fields with long, determined strides.

"Seems a bit firm-minded," I observed to Dave.

He grunted and turned to Anna. "Did you say *Gomer Pyle* was on?"

Anna held the screen door open. "Come on in here and sit a spell, Dave. I'll get you some fresh grits."

Dave took off his hat and went in the house, but I decided to go down to the barn and see what I could do about them duded-up calves.

Twenty minutes later, the blue ribbons was laying in the dust and I was rasping blue polish off the last set of hooves when I heard Dave's horn honking. Stuffing the ribbons in the trash barrel, I headed back up to the house. Dave and Ms. Pinkerton were waiting by the black-and-white.

"Well, Ms. Pinkerton, how soon can you have them off my property?" I brushed blue paint dust off my hands.

"Oh, they can't be moved." She handed me a nasty looking sheaf of papers. "Not so much as a centimeter, Mr. Wilburn. I'm afraid we have a persecuted minority on our hands here. I'm going to have to bring Washington in on this one. It's far too big for me."

"Washington?" I looked at Dave. "D.C.?"

He kneaded the brim of his hat between his fingers. "Sorry, Virgil, but it looks like these little people of yours are running away from..." His face screwed up as he concentrated. "... Po-lity-cal op-pres-y-ion."

"A 'witch,' is what they actually said, no doubt some sort of local term for tyrant." Ms. Pinkerton hiked her briefcase under her arm. "At any rate, I've a great many things to do. If you don't mind, sheriff?"

"Huh?" Dave's mouth dropped open, then he scrambled to open her door.

Just before she ducked her head to get in, she caught my eye. "These people are your responsibility, Mr. Wilburn. See that you take it seriously." She got in and the black-and-white roared down the driveway toward the county road.

"They're not leaving," I said to myself.

"I know!" Anna came up behind me. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Out in the field, I could hear them little sparrow-voices singing again—"Tra-la-la-lala-la"—and shuddered.

By noon, they'd left off painting yellow flowers with green stems on my barn and moved up to the highway. I went out to where they was painting the pavement a glaring yellow and

told them the penalties for defacing public property. They just laughed and painted a dad-gummed yellow daisy on my overalls.

By five, blue ribbons fluttered from every fence post all the way into town, and Anna had to answer the phone about every five minutes to listen to another complaint. By dark, half the cows in Payne County were missing while the rest had taken to sarcastic snickering, and according to reports, not one of them would give so much as a thimbleful of milk.

A little before ten, I was out on the front porch, staring up into the starless night sky, sniffing at the wet smell of rain in the rising wind. Another storm was coming.

Dave pulled up in the driveway, spraying yellow gravel into the grass. I motioned for him to roll the window down as his whirling red light threw bloody shadows over my front yard. "Kind of late, ain't it, Dave?"

"I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it!" His hands were clenched around the steering wheel. "Must have been ten of them, just dancing away in the road over by Homer Zigenhorn's—damnedest thing I ever seen!"

"What, them midgets?"

Shaking his head, he swallowed hard. "No, scarecrows, flappin' their arms and jumpin' around."

"Scarecrows?" I leaned over and smelled his breath. "You been stopping in at the Bottoms Up Lounge again?"

"Hell, no! Look at this!" He pointed at something stuck in the passenger-side window. "One of them reached in and tried to grab me." He rolled down the window and pulled out a black glove stuffed with straw.

The fingers wiggled suddenly and he threw it on the ground. I watched numbly as the glove crawled off towards the field, trailing straw behind it.

Inside the house, the phone rang. A minute later, Anna stuck her head out the door. "Virgil, it's Homer Zigenhorn. He says those midgets of yours pulled some sheets of tin off his shed. He wants you to come over and make them put everything back."

I turned around and met old Dave's eyes as he got out of his car. Now, me and Dave, we'd grown up together, gone to school together, courted together, hell, even painted our undying love for our high school sweethearts on an overpass together. "Well, Dave." I set my jaw. "Are you coming with me?"

"Are you nuts?" He wiped at his face again, and I could see his hand shaking in the car's headlights. "They're *your* midgets."

Lightning cracked across the dark sky, nasty and crooked as a snake's tongue. I grabbed his shirt and dragged him out to my old pickup truck. "Wait here." I went down to the barn for an armful of empty feed sacks and some rope. After that, I shoved him in the passenger side and drove down the yellow-painted road with the beams on high.

"Virgil?"

I glanced over to where Dave was all scrunched up in the corner.

"Virgil, just where do you think they come from anyway?" His voice quavered.

"I dunno." The wind gusted and several fat raindrops splatted on the windshield.

Dave lowered his voice. "I think they're Evil—you know, with a capital 'E'—sent by Satan hisself to steal our souls."

A scarecrow suddenly lurched into the road, waving its arms. I hit the accelerator and knocked it flying into the drainage ditch. Sweat broke out on my upper lip. "Maybe," I said.

"We got to get rid of them before anything worse happens."

"Got any ideas?" I jammed the accelerator down until them ribbon-decorated fence posts was whipping by. The wind howled like a lovesick hound, and the rain came down in solid sheets. I switched on the windshield wipers, then turned onto the dirt road to Zigenhorn's farm.

When we pulled up, I could see Zigenhorn's herd of purebred black and white Holsteins standing around in the rain, watching the little people work on something that gleamed in the headlights.

I gripped the door handle and pushed it down. "Come on, Dave."

"I dunno if that's such a good idea." I could see him shivering in the truck's domelight. "I mean, they might not like it."

Swearing under my breath, I slammed the door and grabbed an empty feed sack out of the truck bed along with the coil of rope. Over in the middle of the driveway, the midgets paid me no mind, just kept on singing and hammering away. I caught the nearest one, the guy with the goatee beard, stuffed his squirming little body head first into the burlap sack, then used my pocketknife to cut a piece of rope and tie him up good and tight. I hoisted the wriggling sack onto my shoulder and

heaved it into the back of the truck.

The cows began to moo and swish their tails. I could have sworn they was saying, "Nooo! Nooo!"

"Dave, get your ass out here!" I hollered, then went after a fat-cheeked woman who was standing on a pail to pound a funnel onto the construction's head. She screeched as I shoved her into the sack and tied her off at the feet. At that point, Dave jumped out and helped me swing her over the side of the truck.

After that, we made better time. I filled the sacks with little people; he tied them off and loaded them into the truck. It was hard to see with the rain streaming down our faces, and them midgets was real slippery. Every so often, lightning lit up the whole yard and I would see the godawful *thing* they was putting together, some kind of robot-looking contraption made out of tin.

When we got the last midget sacked up, we kicked the tin thing apart, then jumped out of the way as its arms and legs jerked around in the gravel like a dying chicken. The wind was blowing so hard that we could barely stand up, and the raindrops felt like BB's hitting my face. The wind was beginning

to sound like—I listened harder—like a *train*.

The hair rose on the back of my neck. I motioned Dave back into the truck cab and turned on the radio. Static crackled, then I heard a tinny, faraway voice. "—touched down close to Wichita and went back up into the clouds, moving approximately forty miles an hour in an east-northeasterly direction. All of Payne County is under a tornado warning. Take cover in a basement or in the center of a building away from windows. I repeat, this is—" Static flared again as lightning flashed up in the rolling clouds.

"Where do you suppose it is?" Dave pressed his face to the window.

"Could be anywhere this side of Wichita." I put the truck in gear. "See if you can get a fix."

"Why?" He stared at me. "We're not far enough east to be in its path."

I set my jaw and headed east, the events of the past two days swimming through my mind . . . talking cows . . . Anna's eyes changing color . . . scarecrows that danced . . . tin things that moved . . . witches that broke through regular scheduled programming . . . It was as clear as the beans in my field—that damn twister had brought things from *another*

world and dumped them in the middle of my farm.

Reports came over the radio between bursts of static. The twister held to its northeasterly course, touching down next at Kirk, then ten minutes later close to Dumbrowski Corners. Dave leaned his head back against the seat. "That's just fifteen miles from here."

I braked the truck to a stop. "You want out?"

I have to give old Dave credit: he looked as sick as a skunk-sprayed dog but shook his head. I jammed the accelerator down and took the next turn, the one that should take us right across the tornado's path.

Even though it was black as the inside of a hole and the rain was pouring down, I could feel the damn thing as we got closer, a rumbling, grinding, destructive force that *hummed* as it skipped along.

After a couple of minutes, I stopped the truck and jumped out, fighting to see through the sheeting rain. Dave followed me, and we slogged around to the tailgate. I picked up a sack and heard some squeaky kind of "ding-dong" song from inside as I dumped it in the mud at the side of the road.

The rain let up, and I could see a faint, stomach-churning greenness as the twister rushed

toward us. "Hurry up!" I told Dave, and we put our backs into it, unloading the sacks as fast as we could. After the last one, I dived back into the cab. Old Dave was there ahead of me, gripping the dashboard as the freight train roar of the twister grew louder and louder. I turned west, back the way we had come, hoping to get out of range before the twister passed.

The back end of the truck began to shimmy and slide. I skidded into the ditch with a thump and bit my tongue. We sat there for a couple of seconds, breathing hard, then I put it in reverse; the wheels just spun in the mud.

The train sound was overwhelming now. Dave motioned at me, and I nodded. We opened the doors and ran to the other side of the road, then plunged into the muddy, rain-filled ditch. Shivering, I covered my head with my arms. The monster sucked at us, trying to pull us up into the sky. I plunged my hands down into the cold, squishy mud and held onto the weeds with everything I had, my eyes closed, my teeth clenched—

And then it was past.

When I quit shaking enough to sit up, I looked up and seen the dark shape of my truck flipped over on its top. The rain

began again, pelting down my neck like ice water, but not as hard as before. We wrenched one of the truck's doors open and got a flashlight, then hiked back down to where we'd left the midgets.

Nothing was left, not so much as a silver bell or a thread of burlap or a single dab of blue paint. We both stood there, just breathing hard and staring down at the mud.

Dave shoved his hands into his pockets. "It was the only thing we could have done."

"Yeah, I know." I fingered the salty-tasting cut on my tongue and winced.

"You know what's funny about all this?" he said as we

turned to start the long walk back to Zigenhorn's farm.

"Not a damned thing, near as I can see."

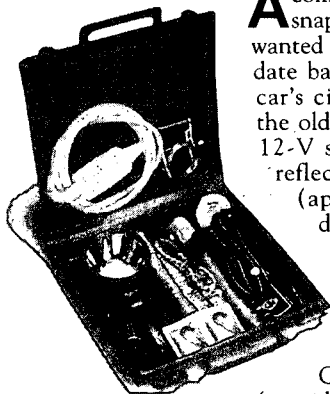
He tilted his head back and let the rain beat on his mud-streaked face for a moment. "If that first twister had just gone another half a mile, it would have dumped them midgets down in Henry Gale's pasture instead of your bean field, then all of this would have been *his* problem."

"Don't matter now," I said. "I just hope them midgets is back to where they come from."

"Yeah." He was silent for a moment. "After all, there ain't no place like home."

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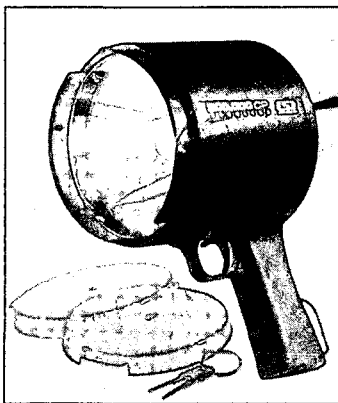
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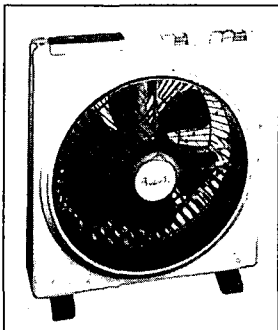
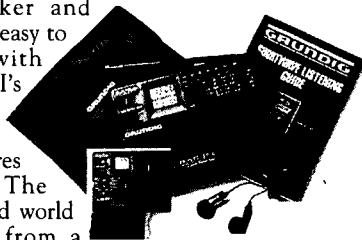


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Early to Rise

by Jackie Walsh



There weren't any more toys left around the house, and that, Edna Goddard was sure, was more than half the problem. Years ago, she had gone to bed, torn between picking up the skate on the stairway or leaving it where Amy or Steve had abandoned it.

That secret indecision had been delicious to her, a private

struggle of conscience, an action with more consequence to it than deciding between making pancakes or waffles for breakfast. She could wake up the next morning a well-to-do widow or the Edna Goddard she had always been, so reliable she was nearly invisible, someone so dependable, so always there that she had begun to think of her apron as Steve had

thought of the towels he had played with, tying it around her as her cloak of invisibility.

I shouldn't have given him the good towels to play with, she thought. I should have given him my red-check apron.

Only once had anyone tripped on a toy left on the stairs, and that was that little girl—what was her name? The skinny one with glasses, Amy's friend—she couldn't remember the child's name. It was so long ago and the girl had rapidly disappeared from Amy's circle of friends, despite the fact that they had all made a midnight trip to the emergency room with the child, despite the fact that Cecil had paid to have the girl's arm set. Her tears dried quickly enough once Amy said, "I forgot to tell you to be careful on the stairs. We leave stuff there sometimes."

In a reedy, quavering voice, the little girl said, "My mom picks all that stuff up before we go to bed." Then both girls turned to look at Edna inquisitively.

Lucy. That was her name.

Edna put aside her needle-point and folded her reading glasses. She would have stretched and yawned and said, "I'm going on up to bed," but there was no one to say it to. Cecil was in the basement. Edna heard the distant whine

of machinery. A sander or saw or something like that, expensive machines that turned out expensive bits of sticks.

"Look at that dowel," Cecil would say, holding up a thoroughly ordinary looking piece of wood. "That's one hell of a dowel."

Once she had bothered to say, "I've seen them in the hardware store for a nickel a foot." She didn't say it any more. She was tired of Cecil's glaring at her when she said it, no matter that it was true.

Why did he want to waste his time making pieces of wood he could well afford to buy at the hardware store? And what on earth did he do with them once he got them made? She never saw them put to any use. Maybe it was just the same dowel, always the same one that he displayed to her. She didn't know which was more unsettling, to think that he always worked on the same piece of wood, or that there was a stack of quartered logs waiting to be made into dowels on one side of the basement and a bin full of identical finished pieces on the other side.

She glanced around the living room. The Waterford lamp Amy had sent for Christmas last year was turned on low next to the wing chair. Its polished cuts gleamed in the dim

light. It was pretty, she thought, pretty in an uncomfoting way. Small compensation for Amy's refusing to come home for the holidays.

She didn't understand why neither of them came home any more. It wasn't as if Edna and Cecil drank or quarreled. They had always been good parents, had provided for the children, had done all the parental things they were supposed to do. For a year Edna had suffered through hours of Geraldo and Phil and Oprah, listening to stories of domestic horror and childhood tragedy until she finally gave up, realizing she would never understand why her grown children avoided their parents.

Maybe we've bored them away, she thought, glancing around the living room. The carpet was the same carpet that had been on the living room floor for twenty years, a good Karastan with Aubusson style flowers and loops on it, beige and cream colored flowers on a darker beige background. The walls were a lighter beige, and the damask drapes were the color of coffee with a lot of cream in it.

A fierce, sudden urge burned in her to reach up, to tear down the curtains, to drive to Wilkins' hardware store and bang on the front door until it woke

up Mr. and Mrs. Wilkins on the second floor so she could demand gallons of bright yellow paint. Or purple. Something, anything, stronger than this. She wanted to dip a paint roller in a tray of buttercup yellow paint and swathe it on the living room walls. She wouldn't even bother to tape the molding or dustcover the furniture. She imagined Cecil on the phone to Steve, panicked and furious, telling their son half a world away that his mother had lost her mind and was painting the walls yellow in the middle of the night. She imagined him saying, "You know how she gets."

Cecil said that frequently, but he didn't know how she got. He couldn't. He didn't know how she was or why she was that way. She didn't know herself. She only knew there were times when she wanted to run out into the street and howl at the moon. She had done that once in the back yard, feeling something inside her, as if someone had pumped helium into her stomach, feeling it release as she had let the cry rise up in her throat. And for days, weeks, afterward, she was suddenly visible. In the supermarket, she heard women say amongst themselves, her own invisible sorority, "Did you hear what Edna Goddard did?"

She sighed and turned off the lamp next to her chair, leaving Amy's lamp on as a nightlight. Through the darkened hallway, she self-consciously moved to the left, away from the spot where the dog had slept next to the furnace vent. They had had three dogs, a succession of refugees from the pound, and it was as if each dog had known exactly how to behave, had been left instructions from his predecessors. Even the dogs were the same, she thought. Even their dogs were boring.

In the kitchen, a light burned over the sink. The kitchen was clean. The whole house was. Cecil had taken it as a point of pride that they were able to afford Maria to come in and clean floors that already shone with waxing and to iron shirts that were only worn to the basement to turn new, smooth bits of wood.

She took out the milk carton from the refrigerator and did what she had spent sixteen years training Steve not to do. She stood in front of the open refrigerator door and drank from the carton, then wiped her milky lips with the back of her hand.

She heard steady footsteps coming up the basement stairs. Hurriedly she closed the door and was at the sink washing

her hands when Cecil, still tidy despite his six hour shift in the basement, appeared at the kitchen door.

"Ed? I'm going on upstairs."

"I'll be right up."

She didn't like to be called Ed. She didn't feel like a girl who would let herself be nicknamed with a man's name. There was a casual, rough and tumble air to it that felt alien to her. Being called Edna didn't make her feel much better. What an awful name to give a child, she thought. She had half admired Amy's college friends who had made up new names and new lives for themselves. One had called herself Gypsy Starchild. Later she had gone back to what she had been born with, Beverly Robinson.

"Ed?"

She shook her head a little, a light shiver. Cecil seemed to be looking right past her, through her, at the window over the sink. "I'll be right up."

Satisfied, he turned away and she said softly, "Early to bed."

He echoed after her, "Early to rise."

As they had every night. For thirty-six years. She gripped the edge of the sink and thought, dear God.

After this long, she thought, how can we care? What can we do? Nothing. Nothing.

She flicked off the light over the sink and let her eyes adjust to the darkness. She knew this house. They had lived here for thirty-six years, had been the first and only family to live in it. She could walk it blindfolded. She had walked it in the darkness, sometimes paced it with a colicky baby on her shoulder and an anxious dog at her side.

She walked it in darkness now. Cecil had turned off all the lights downstairs.

In the front hallway, she doublechecked the bolt on the door, glanced out to a safe suburban street that had seen nothing more threatening than a rash of summer break-ins years ago when Steve had been a teenager. Even in the midst of all that excitement, their house had never been touched.

She started up the stairway, quietly counting the three steps to the landing, the turn to the right, then again counted. Something rolled under her foot. She felt it, hard and round, beneath the sole of her shoe. She jerked back, caught off balance, her right arm tensing, her shoulder strained as she struggled to balance herself on the stair. She fell to a knee,

gasping, still clutching the banister.

Her breath came fast, adrenaline surged through her blood in little bursts. She couldn't see in the darkness, but she got to her knees and pushed her hands in front of her, searching.

There. She held it up and in the dim light from the bedroom, saw a perfectly round stick of wood no bigger than a pencil.

Cecil came out of the bathroom. She counted his steps to the bed. She followed his movements. The soft slap of a bedroom slipper as it fell to the floor, then the other.

Her heart lightened. She knew it, she felt it. She quickly went back and counted to the step where she had stumbled. One, two, three. Right there. And with sure hands, she moved the dowel up to four. Sidestepping it, she ran up the stairs.

He smiled when he saw her. "Early to bed, early to rise," he said and leaned forward to meet her kiss.

"Yes, Cecil. Yes, indeed. What do you think for breakfast? Pancakes or waffles?"

His smile didn't waver. "Let's just wait and see what the morning brings."

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Night Wire

by H. F. Arnold



“N ew York, September 30 CP FLASH

“Ambassador Holliwell died here today. The end came suddenly as the ambassador was alone in his study . . .”

There is something ungodly about these night wire jobs. You sit up here on the top floor of a skyscraper and listen in to the whispers of a civilization. New York, London, Calcutta, Bombay, Singapore—they’re your next door neighbors after the street lights go dim and the world has gone to sleep.

Alone in the quiet hours between two and four, the receiving operators doze over their sounders and the news comes in. Fires and disasters and suicides. Murders, crowds, catastrophes. Sometimes an earthquake with a casualty list as long as your arm. The night wire man takes it down almost in his sleep, picking it off on his typewriter with one finger.

Once in a long time you prick up your ears and listen. You’ve heard of someone you knew in Singapore, Halifax, or Paris, long ago. Maybe they’ve been promoted, but more probably they’ve been murdered or drowned. Perhaps they just decided to quit and took some bizarre way out. Made it interesting enough to get in the news.

But that doesn’t happen often. Most of the time you sit and doze and tap, tap on your typewriter and wish you were home in bed.

Sometimes, though, queer things happen. One did the other night, and I haven’t got over it yet. I wish I could.

You see, I handle the night manager’s desk in a western seaport town; what the name is doesn’t matter.

There is, or rather was, only one night operator on my staff, a fellow named John Morgan, about forty years of age, I should say, and a sober, hardworking sort.

He was one of the best operators I ever knew, what is known as a “double” man. That means he could handle two instruments at once and type the stories on different typewriters at the same time. He was one of the three men I ever knew who could do it consistently, hour after hour, and never make a mistake.

Generally, we used only one wire at night, but sometimes, when it was late and the news was coming fast, the Chicago and Denver stations would open a second wire, and then Morgan would do his stuff. He was a wizard, a mechanical automatic wizard which functioned marvelously but was without imagination.

On the night of the sixteenth he complained of feeling tired. It was the first and last time I had ever heard him say a word about himself, and I had known him for three years.

It was just three o'clock, and we were running only one wire. I was nodding over reports at my desk and not paying much attention to him, when he spoke.

"Jim," he said, "does it feel close in here to you?"

"Why, no, John," I answered, "but I'll open a window if you like."

"Never mind," he said. "I reckon I'm just a little tired."

That was all that was said, and I went on working. Every ten minutes or so I would walk over and take a pile of copy that had stacked up neatly beside the typewriter as the messages were printed out in triplicate.

It must have been twenty minutes after he spoke that I noticed he had opened up the other wire and was using both typewriters. I thought it was a little unusual, as there was nothing very "hot" coming in. On my next trip I picked up the copy from both machines and took it back to my desk to sort out the duplicates.

The first wire was running out the usual sort of stuff and I just looked over it hurriedly. Then I turned to the second pile of copy. I remembered it particularly because the story was from a town I had never heard of: "Xebico." Here is the dispatch. I saved a duplicate of it from our files:

"Xebico, Sept. 16 CP BULLETIN

"The heaviest mist in the history of the city settled over the town at 4 o'clock yesterday afternoon. All traffic has stopped, and the mist hangs like a pall over everything. Lights of ordinary intensity fail to pierce the fog, which is constantly growing heavier.

"Scientists here are unable to agree as to the cause, and the local weather bureau states that the like has never occurred before in the history of the city.

"At 7 P.M. last night municipal authorities . . .
(more)"

That was all there was. Nothing out of the ordinary at a bureau headquarters, but as I say, I noticed the story because of the name of the town.

It must have been fifteen minutes later that I went over for another batch of copy. Morgan was slumped down in his chair and had switched his green electric light shade so that the gleam

missed his eyes and hit only the top of the two typewriters.

Only the usual stuff was in the right-hand pile, but the left-hand batch carried another story from Xebico. All press dispatches come in "takes," meaning that parts of many different stories are strung along together, perhaps with but a few paragraphs of each coming through at a time. This second story was marked "add fog." Here is the copy:

"At 7 P.M. the fog had increased noticeably. All lights were now invisible, and the town was shrouded in pitch darkness.

"As a peculiarity of the phenomenon, the fog is accompanied by a sickly odor, comparable to nothing yet experienced here."

Below that in customary press fashion was the hour, 3:27, and the initials of the operator, JM.

There was only one other story in the pile from the second wire. Here it is:

"2nd add Xebico Fog

"Accounts as to the origin of the mist differ greatly. Among the most unusual is that of the sexton of the local church, who groped his way to headquarters in a hysterical condition and declared that the fog originated in the village churchyard.

"It was first visible as a soft gray blanket clinging to the earth above the graves," he stated. "Then it began to rise, higher and higher. A subterranean breeze seemed to blow it in billows, which split up and then joined together again.

"Fog phantoms, writhing in anguish, twisted the mist into queer forms and figures. And then, in the very thick midst of the mass, something moved.

"I turned and ran from the accursed spot. Behind me I heard screams coming from the houses bordering on the graveyard."

"Although the sexton's story is generally discredited, a party has left to investigate. Immediately after telling his story, the sexton collapsed and is now in a local hospital, unconscious."

Queer story, wasn't it. Not that we aren't used to it, for a lot of unusual stories come in over the wire. But for some reason or other, perhaps because it was so quiet that night, the report of the fog made a great impression on me.

It was almost with dread that I went over to the waiting piles of copy. Morgan did not move, and the only sound in the room was the tap-tap of the sounders. It was ominous, nerve-racking.

There was another story from Xebico in the pile of copy. I seized on it anxiously.

"New Lead Xebico Fog CP

"The rescue party which went out at 11 P.M. to investigate a weird story of the origin of a fog which, since late yesterday, has shrouded the city in darkness has failed to return. Another and larger party has been dispatched.

"Meanwhile, the fog has, if possible, grown heavier. It seeps through the cracks in the doors and fills the atmosphere with a depressing odor of decay. It is oppressive, terrifying, bearing with it a subtle impression of things long dead.

"Residents of the city have left their homes and gathered in the local church, where the priests are holding services of prayer. The scene is beyond description. Grown folk and children are alike terrified, and many are almost beside themselves with fear.

"Amid the wisps of vapor which partly veil the church auditorium, an old priest is praying for the welfare of his flock. They alternately wail and cross themselves.

"From the outskirts of the city may be heard cries of unknown voices. They echo through the fog in queer uncadenced minor keys. The sounds resemble nothing so much as wind whistling through a gigantic tunnel. But the night is calm and there is no wind. The second rescue party . . . (more)"

I am a calm man and never in a dozen years spent with the wires have been known to become excited, but despite myself I rose from my chair and walked to the window.

Could I be mistaken, or far down in the canyons of the city beneath me did I see a faint trace of fog? Pshaw! It was all imagination.

In the pressroom the click of the sounders seemed to have raised the tempo of their tune. Morgan alone had not stirred from his chair. His head sunk between his shoulders, he tapped the dispatches out on the typewriters with one finger of each hand.

He looked asleep, but no; endlessly, efficiently, the two machines rattled off line after line, as relentlessly and effortlessly as death itself. There was something about the monotonous movement of

the typewriter keys that fascinated me. I walked over and stood behind his chair, reading over his shoulder the type as it came into being, word by word.

Ah, here was another:

“Flash Xebico CP

“There will be no more bulletins from this office. The impossible has happened. No messages have come into this room for twenty minutes. We are cut off from the outside and even the streets below us.

“I will stay with the wire until the end.

“It is the end, indeed. Since 4 P.M. yesterday the fog has hung over the city. Following reports from the sexton of the local church, two rescue parties were sent out to investigate conditions on the outskirts of the city. Neither party has ever returned nor was any word received from them. It is quite certain now that they will never return.

“From my instrument I can gaze down on the city beneath me. From the position of this room on the thirteenth floor, nearly the entire city can be seen. Now I can see only a thick blanket of blackness where customarily are lights and life.

“I fear greatly that the wailing cries heard constantly from the outskirts of the city are the death cries of the inhabitants. They are constantly increasing in volume and are approaching the center of the city.

“The fog yet hangs over everything. If possible, it is even heavier than before, but the conditions have changed. Instead of an opaque, impenetrable wall of odorous vapor, there now swirls and writhes a shapeless mass in contortions of almost human agony. Now and again the mass parts and I catch a brief glimpse of the streets below.

“People are running to and fro, screaming in despair. A vast bedlam of sound flies up to my window, and above all is the immense whistling of unseen and unfelt winds.

“The fog has again swept over the city, and the whistling is coming closer and closer.

“It is now directly beneath me.

“God! An instant ago the mist opened and I caught a glimpse of the street below.

“The fog is not simply vapor—it lives! By the side of each moaning and weeping human is a companion figure, an aura of strange

and varicolored hues. How the shapes cling! Each to a living thing!

"The men and women are down. Flat on their faces. The fog figures caress them lovingly. They are kneeling beside them. They are—but I dare not tell it.

"The prone and writhing bodies have been stripped of their clothing. They are being consumed—piecemeal.

"A merciful wall of hot, steamy vapor has swept over the whole scene. I can see no more.

"Beneath me the wall of vapor is changing colors. It seems to be lighted by internal fires. No, it isn't. I have made a mistake. The colors are from above, reflections from the sky.

"Look up! Look up! The whole sky is in flames. Colors as yet unseen by man or demon. The flames are moving; they have started to intermix; the colors rearrange themselves. They are so brilliant that my eyes burn, yet they are a long way off.

"Now they have begun to swirl, to circle in and out, twisting in intricate designs and patterns. The lights are racing each with each, a kaleidoscope of unearthly brilliance.

"I have made a discovery. There is nothing harmful in the lights. They radiate force and friendliness, almost cheeriness. But by their very strength, they hurt.

"As I look, they are swinging closer and closer, a million miles at each jump. Millions of miles with the speed of light. Aye, it is light the quintessence of all light. Beneath it the fog melts into a jeweled mist radiant, rainbow-colored of a thousand varied spectra.

"I can see the streets. Why, they are filled with people! The lights are coming closer. They are all around me. I am enveloped. I . . ."

The message stopped abruptly. The wire to Xebico was dead. Beneath my eyes in the narrow circle of light from under the green lampshade, the black printing no longer spun itself, letter by letter, across the page.

The room seemed filled with a solemn quiet, a silence vaguely impressive, powerful.

I looked down at Morgan. His hands had dropped nervelessly at his sides, while his body had hunched over peculiarly. I turned the lampshade back, throwing the light squarely in his face. His eyes were staring fixed.

Filled with a sudden foreboding, I stepped beside him and called Chicago on the wire. After a second the sounder clicked its answer.

Why? But there was something wrong. Chicago was reporting that Wire Two had not been used throughout the evening.

"Morgan!" I shouted. "Morgan! Wake up, it isn't true. Someone has been hoaxing us. Why . . ." In my eagerness I grasped him by the shoulder.

His body was quite cold. Morgan had been dead for hours. Could it be that his sensitized brain and automatic fingers had continued to record impressions even after the end?

I shall never know, for I shall never again handle the night shift. Search in a world atlas discloses no town of Xebico. Whatever it was that killed John Morgan will forever remain a mystery.

SOLUTION TO THE SEPTEMBER "UNSOLVED":

Mr. Luboff from Catalfa, occupying room 401 in the Metropole Hotel, was the killer.

ARRIVAL	AGENT	COUNTRY	WEAPON	ROOM
Mon.	Karnoy	Dumland	hatchet	301
Tues.	Mazuma	Ambigua	darts	101
Wed.	Nerov	Borgary	air gun	201
Thurs.	Ochs	Egerica	pistol	501
Fri.	Luboff	Catalfa	knife	401

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



If you haven't yet read James Lee Burke, make sure you get a copy of **In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead** (Hyperion, \$20), for this is an exceptionally fine crime fiction novel. Burke uses the small town of New Iberia, Louisiana, as his backdrop, and indeed its local characters, lush swamp foliage, and indigenous wildlife are no small part of the power of this book. Detective Dave Rochebeaux makes his sixth appearance here, teaming up this time with a worthy partner in the person of F.B.I. agent Rosie Gomez. The plot weaves together many threads: an old murder that Dave witnessed decades ago, a local bully turned gangster who's back in town, a likeable alcoholic movie star shooting on location, and the disconcerting appearances in the mist of General John Bell Hood and his Confederate soldiers. Burke's is a large talent, and this novel will add to his stature. It enriches the entire genre of crime fiction.

From Phillip Margolin comes a heart-racing thriller titled **Gone, but Not Forgotten** (Doubleday, \$22). That was the message that accompanied a black rose, the only two clues left by the serial killer in an upstate New York suburb. Now it's twenty years later and almost a continent away, and the Portland police are confronted with the identical M.O. But the New York killer was caught—wasn't he? Fans of Patricia Cornwell's female medical examiner will find Margolin's criminal defense lawyer Betsy Tannenbaum a comparable protagonist, both strong and sympathetic; this killer is simultaneously monstrous and mesmerizing. But the real strength in Margolin's novel is a clever plot that covers (or

uncovers) some fascinating legal ground, exposing the shocking aftermath of a well-intentioned legal system when its wheels grind exceeding small.

An exciting new book by an old hand is the debut volume in a series. Indiana Deputy Sheriff Mary Hopkins is a single mom as well as a very smart cop. The book is **Gravestone** (Pocket, \$20) by P. M. Carlson, and it's chock full of everything a mystery reader loves: fully drawn characters, a strong sense of place, keen pacing, and themes that twist themselves around a complex plot, drawing the reader inexorably deeper. Carlson does this, I might add, without sickeningly graphic details. Instead we get a fascinating case that involves a powerful family, old and fearfully dark secrets, and Klan activities both past and present in Indiana, all of it told in a strong, first-person voice. This one's a must-read.

Edward Sklepowich's third Urbino Macintyre mystery is **Liquid Desires** (Morrow, \$22), and like the other two, it is set in the fair city of Venice. Urbino is an expatriate American with a modest home in the city and a modest income from writing. One can no more imagine his Venice without the Countess Barbara than without canals, for the older woman and Urbino are the closest of friends. Thus he is pained for Barbara when a beautiful young woman introduces herself as the illegitimate daughter of Barbara's beloved dead husband, and he reluctantly agrees to try to learn the truth of the girl's claim. But someone has apparently been damaged more than the countess, for the girl is found dead, and Urbino is certain that it is murder. Don't look to Sklepowich for heartstopping action or shocking plot twists. Instead, pour a glass of vino, take the book into the sun, and relax in the intelligent company of a sophisticated sleuth who calls this beautiful Italian city his home.

For a dash of history with your mystery, try C. L. Grace's **A Shrine of Murders** (St. Martin's, \$17.95), which features Kathryn Swinbrooke. She's a daughter of a doctor who has inherited her father's practice, which apparently was possible and not altogether uncommon in fifteenth century Canterbury. A serial killer (which probably *was* uncommon in fifteenth century Canterbury, but never mind) is threatening to do serious injury to the tourist trade (a.k.a. pilgrims to the shrine of the martyred Becket). The town fathers team the doctor up with a dashing Irishman, a representative of the new king. There are fascinating tidbits of medical lore, a glimpse of old Canterbury, even a bit of romance, all of which makes this enjoyable light fare.

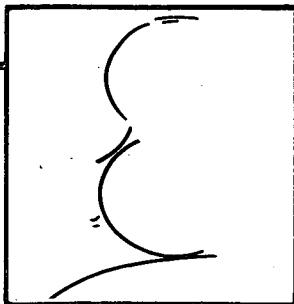
Anne Perry continues her popular Victorian series featuring Charlotte and Thomas Pitt with **Farriers' Lane** (Fawcett, \$20), and it's certainly up to her high standards. A night at the theater ends in the poisoning death of a judge in a nearby box, and the case soon circles back to the grisly crucifixion of a young man some years earlier. The actress starring the evening of the murder has always maintained that her brother, who was executed for the crime, was innocent. As Charlotte uses her family connections to go "backstage" in the higher circles of London society, it appears that the sister's appeal to the judge to review the old case has indeed been a catalyst to the judge's murder. As always, look to Anne Perry for a picture of Victorian society and mores that literally transports the reader into the past. The contrasting details of everyday life in London, the upstairs-downstairs rituals, and the peek into London's theater wings (including an appearance by Oscar Wilde)—these are all gilt, carefully etching a well-crafted mystery supported by the strong cast of characters and ingenious plots that make Anne Perry a perennial favorite.

But I Wouldn't Want to Die There (Pocket, \$20) is Nancy Pickard's latest in her excellent Jenny Cain series, and this one's a winner. Against husband Geoff's protests, Jenny agrees to temporarily fill the shoes of a friend who's been fatally mugged near her Manhattan apartment. Carol, like Jenny, worked as a director for a charitable foundation that ran a number of projects. Surprisingly, it appears that she's left things in a royal mess. Jenny begins to retrace Carol's footsteps, trying to placate several angry donors and clients while struggling with her own mixed feelings about the Big Apple. Is this energy she feels excitement at being part of the greatest city on earth? Or is it just plain fear? And was Carol really a random victim, or was somebody she knew lying in wait for her to jog past? Visit New York City with Jenny Cain; it's a trip you won't soon forget.

Have you haunted any used bookstores lately, perhaps in search of those early books by authors you've just discovered? For a peek behind the used book biz scene, pick up John Dunning's **Booked to Die** (Avon, \$4.99). In addition to providing a neat plot and a very likeable protagonist, Dunning shows how to go from being a burned-out homicide cop to making a go of it in the used book trade. There's action, several sophisticated characters, and great insider's tips into book collecting.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



“Get me Sharon Stone,” a young movie studio executive must have said following the boffo box office hit of *Basic Instinct*. “Get her a hunk, let’s say William Baldwin or Tom Berenger—get both, better demographics. The story should read murder, New York apartment building. What was that Hitchcock flick—*Rear Window*? Okay, toss in binoculars or a telescope. Let’s make it nineties, how about TV cameras? Yeah, sex, murder, and videotape. That’s it! Let’s do lunch.”

That’s Sliver.

When we first meet Stone, who plays newly divorced book editor Carly Norris, she’s looking at an empty apartment in one of those modern, narrow highrises. A sliver building. She’s unaware that the spacious apartment is vacant be-

cause the previous tenant tumbled from the balcony to her death. And wouldn’t you know it, she’s a virtual lookalike for that unfortunate woman.

From the very moment Stone moves in, it seems as if every guy who lives in the building is hitting on her. Lucky for her because, as she tells her best pal, who’s trying to set her up with a blind date, “I’m thirty-five. I don’t need a date, I need a relationship. And preferably one where something happens.”

Stone certainly isn’t disappointed in that regard.

Her two main suitors are Baldwin, who plays computer whiz Zeke Hawkins, and Berenger, washed-up writer Jack Landsford, whose forte is the police procedural. Neither is much of a catch as they’re presented in this story. But they do live nearby.

While the two men battle for

Stone's heart and body (most probably for her body), more tenants are murdered. In fact, *Sliver* may do more to increase the vacancy rate of New York City apartments than a change in the rent laws. Naturally, the two men are also the two main murder suspects. Stone winds up making time with Baldwin, who takes her on a first date to a health club weight room. That's how silly this story is.

None of the three main characters is particularly appealing, but Stone and Baldwin are especially unanimated, despite their too-numerous and too-long sex scenes. Stone is flat and passive. She practically whispers many of her lines. Baldwin looks like he's sleepwalking, barely able to keep his droopy eyes open.

The main inanimate character, the *Sliver*, does arouse some interest with its stark atmosphere. But the old gothic New York City apartment building in *Single White Female* added an uneasiness to that film which is lacking here.

In a race to the finish, Stone must guess who's knocking off her neighbors before she gets too deeply involved with Baldwin and before she becomes a victim herself. Of course, any normal person would spend a few nights at a friend's to get

away from the spooky building and its creepy crazies.

One of the most annoying aspects of the film is the mind-numbing score. Every time we become privy to the secret video control room of the *Sliver's* TV surveillance system, and every time Stone and Baldwin go at each other, monotonous percussive music is blasting away. There's nothing subtle about it.

Joe Eszterhas, who wrote the screenplay for *Basic Instinct*, does it here as well. It's based on the novel by Ira Levin, although much of the Levin story is discarded. His dialogue is goofy at times—Baldwin, for example, shows Stone his model volcano, telling her, "I'd like to fly into one. It sounds like fun." Yeah, good luck, pal.

When we do get to the finish of this one hundred eleven minute movie, it's a big disappointment. But at least the buildup doesn't give us much hope of a heartstopping, breathtaking, or surprising conclusion.

"Just one more thing," the studio exec must have added, "throw in a shower scene. It worked in that other Hitchcock thing—*Psycho*. Better yet, make it a bath scene. That ought to steam things up." Here's a hint: it doesn't.

THE STORY THAT WON

The May Mysterious Photo-Randall J. Covill of Atkinson, mentions go to Tom Wood of Thomen of Houston, Texas; California; Kris Cornwall of Terry E. Lutwen of Canyon



graph contest was won by New Hampshire. Honorable Franklin, Tennessee; John Jean Stately of Hollywood, Wakefield, Rhode Island; Lake, California; Julie G. De-Groat of Theresa, New York; Aaron Kellough of Englewood, Colorado; James Denham of Mexico, Missouri; Robert A. Frister of Succasunna, New Jersey; Susan C. Trotter of Palm Harbor, Florida; and Eileen Rystrom of York, Nebraska.

DETECTIVE WORK by Randall J. Covill

Inspector Appledore approached the victim's shoes. They were the latest in high tech footwear—so-called “smart shoes.”

“What was your relationship to the deceased?” demanded Appledore in a brusque-to-the-point-of-rudeness tone.

“We served him well!” answered the shoes. “Twice a day we told him his weight, pulse rate, blood pressure, distance walked, and calories burned. Moreover, we kept his feet warm in winter, cool in summer, and dry all year round. We spent our nights next to his bed to warn him if anyone approached and devoted ourselves to his health and safety!”

“Are you armed?” asked Appledore. High tech made Appledore nervous. He didn't like machines because he did not understand them.

“No,” answered the shoes, “but we can communicate with people and other smart machines.” Appledore winced at being compared to a “smart machine.”

“You never disagreed with the victim?” asked Appledore.

“We cannot lie. Yes, we did argue. He was an impatient man, always rushing about, kicking things in his way, and that hurt!” said the shoes.

Appledore suddenly turned to the “smart baler” standing idly nearby. “I arrest you and the shoes for conspiring to kill the farmer,” said Appledore.

“Don't worry and don't say anything!” said the shoes to the baler. “Just make bail fast!” they thundered.

Inspector Appledore jumped back out of the way as the baler rumbled forward. He would need help to bring this one in, he realized as he raced for the car.

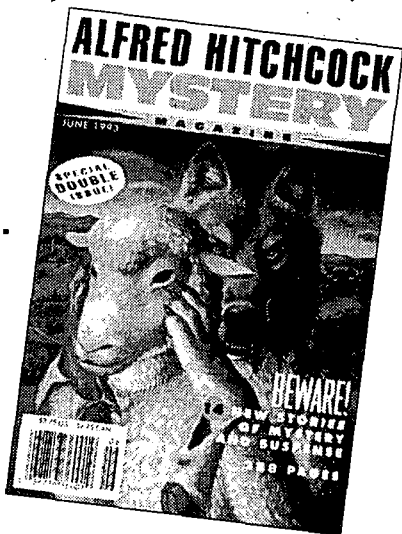
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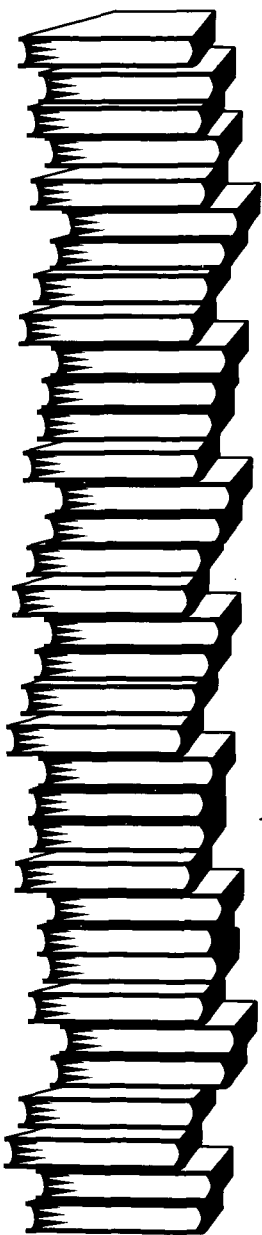
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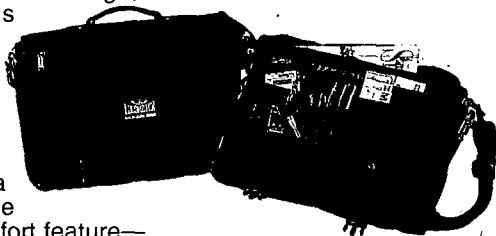
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